THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 2

- A QUESTION OF PROOF
- THERE'S TROUBLE BREWING
- THE SMILER WITH THE KNIFE

THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 2

Poet Laureate C. Day Lewis, writing under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake, created 16 brilliant, literate mysteries featuring urbane, Oxford-educated amateur detective Nigel Strangeways.

In ***A Question of Proof,*** Sports Day at Sudeley Hall finds the prep school in an uproar...but not because of the races. One of the boys—young Algernon Wyvern-Wemyss, repulsive, bullying nephew of Headmaster Percival Vale—has been discovered strangled in a haystack. Things look bad for English master Michael Evans when his silver pen turns up at the crime scene—doubly so because Michael dropped it there earlier while trysting with the headmaster's wife! Michael quickly summons Nigel Strangeways, old Oxford chum, whose inquiries into the lives of the teaching staff reveal some startling lessons in blackmail and revenge. Not until Nigel is inducted into the highly unofficial society of The Black Spot is the secret to a sinister killer revealed.

In ***There's Trouble Brewing,*** Nigel is lecturing the Maiden Astbury Literary Society on modern poets when he's buttonholed by Eustace Bunnett, the local brewery owner, on quite another subject. Bunnett, a mean and vindictive man, wants to know who murdered Truffles, his fox terrier, by hurling him into an open brewery vat. As Nigel tours the brewery the next day, he makes a

(continued on back flap)

Book Club Edition

THE
NICHOLAS BLAKE
TREASURY

Volume 2

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- *A Question of Proof*
- *There's Trouble Brewing*
- *The Smiler with the Knife*

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by

Nicholas Blake

Nelson Doubleday, Inc.
Garden City, New York

A QUESTION OF PROOF
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THERE'S TROUBLE BREWING
Originally published by William Collins Sons and Company in 1937.
Reprinted by arrangement.

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Printed in the United States of America

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Volume 2

A QUESTION OF PROOF

FOR
MARGARET

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Chapter I

ENTER SEVERALLY

The scene is a bedroom in Sudeley Hall preparatory school: not one of the airy, green-washed, ostentatiously hygienic dormitories so reassuring to the science-ridden mind of modern parenthood; but one of those bedrooms, resembling in its extreme narrowness and draughtiness nothing so much as a section of corridor in an express train, which tradition assigns to dons, schoolmasters and the lower ranks of domestic servant. The time is seven forty-five on the twentieth of June, 193—. There is a confused noise without, the pandemonium of eighty boys shaking off dull sloth and preparing to run their daily stage of duty, punctuated by occasional explosions from the master on duty. The incidental music is provided by a chorus of blackbird, thrush and sparrow, by the motor lawnmower giving a final trim to Big Field in view of today's festivities, and by the first of our dramatis personae, Michael Evans, who is singing snatches of the "Lament for Patrick Sarsfield" to his reflection in the mirror. The lower part of his face, a not too prominent chin and an amiable mouth, are concealed by lather; but he is noting with his usual faintly surprised approval the rather haughty set of nostril and brow, the curious dark blue of his eyes, and the black hair, disordered but not, he considered, uninteresting in its general effect.

"Really, you might have done a good deal worse," he apostrophised the man in the looking glass. "You are no Ramon Navarro, it is true. But on the other hand, you are not a human mouse like poor Sims or a battered Adonis like Gadsby. In good taste without being gaudy. A Beta Plus face, on the whole. . . . 'But far from your country you lie cold and low . . .' Damn this blade! . . . 'Ah, why, Patrick Sarsfield, ah why did you go?' "

He wiped off the remains of lather and resumed his soliloquy, "To-day being Sports Day we will drape ourselves in an Old Boys' tie. One can never be too careful about impressing the parents with one's essential Old Boyhood and Alma Maternity. Faugh, what a riot of colour! What maniac could ever have conceived this blend of magenta, green and orange? Thank God it's faded, anyway. And this unseemly length of silk is a passport to respectability, and open sesame to the great heart of the British middle-classes. . . . Why is it that the boys are all so nice, cheerful, unaffected, honest even and intelligent; and the parents—Lord save us—nasty, dull, brutish and short, or however it goes. That, I suppose, is the baneful influence of us schoolmasters. . . . Beta, perhaps, rather than Beta Plus. 'No, I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be.' That reminds me—must borrow a pair of property swords for that duel scene with the Fifth. . . . Still, Hero seems to like it all right. How lovely and sweet she is . . . 'with beauty like a tightened bow' . . . and what on earth is going to come of all this? And to-morrow she is going away and I shan't see her till next term. Three months, three God-forsaken months."

From which soliloquy the observant reader will deduce that Michael Evans is sensitive to colour, and something of a Bolshie, as they say; that he had the schoolmaster's conventional disrespect for parents en masse; that he is a good schoolmaster; that he has a sufficiency of that double-edged quality known as a sense of humour; that he is an English master, and really quite up to date; and that he is in love. Unfortunately for Michael, who liked facts to be decorous almost as much as he liked ideas to be dynamite-ish, he was in love with the headmaster's wife. And though she returned his love with all the gaiety and abandon of her happy nature, he could not help feeling a certain distaste at being protagonist in a situation so hackneyed by the contemporary novel and drama. Moreover, they had been lovers now for nearly two months, ever since that memorable and breathless moment when they had found themselves alone and then suddenly in each other's arms in—of all places—an empty class-room. and the situation was becoming increasingly irksome for both of them. Hero was being fretted by the inevitable intimacy with her husband, whom she must have married—she said to herself—in one of her periodic fits of absent-mindedness. Michael, surprised at first to feel none of the traditional "guilt" but only a perfect naturalness in the exploits of their love, was beginning more and more to dislike the stratagems necessary for its free play. He was alarmed, too, even while he admired it, by the recklessness of Hero; she seemed utterly oblivious to the possibility of their being "caught out" and its inevitable consequences. Those consequences would certainly be fatal to Michael. He would never get another job and he had no private means. And even if Percival Vale consented to a divorce, which he suspected was unlikely, Michael would be no better off. For parents, however well acquainted with the Divorce Courts they might be themselves, had a fixed antipathy to handing over their children to be educated by co-respondents.

We shall meet Michael and Hero again this afternoon, in circumstances which turned out to be compromising in more ways than they could possibly suspect, so we may leave him for the moment to run our eye over some other principals in the cast, lingering only to remark that Michael's glass did not crack, that his bust of Dante did not sweat blood, that no hailstones fell out of the flawless sky—in fact, that none of the classical portents showed to warn him of the disastrous events soon to pile themselves upon his head.

Sweeny, the factotum, a querulous and disappointed man, is ringing the ponderous bell for breakfast, unconscious of the circumstances under which he will be ringing the same bell to-morrow. Upstairs the din is cut short. A few stragglers are hurling themselves in grim silence into their outer garments while the rest marshal themselves for the procession downstairs, for the Rev. Percival Vale is a great stickler for the more flashy manifestations of discipline. A long stride resounds over the uncarpeted floors and a voice adjures some sluggard to "brace up, for goodness' sake, Smithers! I want my breakfast." It is the games-master, Edward Griffin. And as he is, like most games-masters, a very nice man indeed, we may go up and be introduced. He is tall and bulky, thirty years of age, with a rolling walk and the genial efficient air of an explorer, and old Oxford rugger blue, his never too equable temper rendered permanently explosive by the devices of the front-row forwards of certain Welsh clubs encountered in his youth. His other accomplishments include a talent for the piccolo and a positive genius for extempore charades. He has also been infected by Michael, his best friend, with a relish for morbid psychology, exercised frequently upon those of his colleagues who meet least with his approval.

Leaving the rank and file to enjoy their breakfast for a little, we now penetrate into the "private side" where the Rev. Percival Vale is sitting down to his, unattended by his wife, who has pleaded the necessity for a "long lie" in view of the afternoon incursion of parents. He is fifty years of age, with thin lips, a rosy-apple face, a precise delivery, a keen appreciation of his position as the fixed centre of a stable little universe and an outspoken contempt for all failures within it. The boys, out of hearing, call him "Pedantic Percy": within his hearing they are apt to call him "Percy," for they have realised that he is not above a little mild flattery and gets quite a kick out of the more respectful form of his nickname. He is an excellent classical scholar, a capable headmaster on strictly conventional lines, and—on the same lines—a decent enough, though unsympathetic, person. It is, in fact, rather a pity that such unpleasant things are to happen to him and his microcosm. No shadow of coming events, however, falls upon his smooth brow and uplifted egg-spoon. He is wondering which of the parents he can touch for a subscription towards the new fives-court, whether Anstruther has a chance for Winchester, and how he shall word his rebuke to Sims for the indiscipline of his French classes.

Let us return, then, to the Hall and listen in to one or two conversations which may or may not have a bearing on events to follow. At the head of the high table sits Tiverton, the senior assistant master; he has a sour mouth, but friendly, sensitive eyes; he has somehow or other fallen into the position of common-room cynic—probably owing to his boyish love of a phrase, for he is really an enthusiast. On his left and right sit Gadsby and Sims, who have already figured in Michael's soliloquy. Sims is one of those nondescript persons who gravitate into education as mud sinks to the bottom of a river, but are a good deal more difficult to stir up. He has a weedy moustache and protruding teeth, and spends his summer holidays on the Continent, ostensibly to rub up his languages, but according to Griffin for more dubious reasons. Gadsby, the local bore, must once have been handsome, but now, partly from drink and partly from mental inertia, is rapidly becoming a ruin. He had been an infantry officer in France, and was not averse to fighting his battles over again: as Tiverton put it—"he has done the state some service and he'll damn well see that they know it." Beyond these two sit Evans and Griffin, and at the other end of the table Cyril Wrench is reading the *Daily Herald* with an air of defiance. He has lately come down from one of the minor Oxford colleges, an aesthete by choice but an incurable petty-bourgeois by nature.

"Terrible affair, this Staveley murder," exclaimed Gadsby, rustling his *Daily Express* in a marked manner. "I see they've nearly finished the fullah's trial. I always say"—Michael trod heavily upon Griffin's toe under the table—"I always say, Tiverton, that you never know what a fullah's capable of when there's a woman in the case."

Griffin and Evans sighed rapturously at this new specimen for their collection—they were confirmed platitude-hunters—while Gadsby proceeded on his remorseless way:

"Here's this chap Jones, a bank-clerk, married man, exemplary life; suddenly falls for a barmaid; trots round the corner for a packet of arsenic; does his wife in. What amazes me, Griffin, is the nerve some of these quiet little chaps have. I remember in my platoon——"

Griffin interrupted hastily to dam the torrent: "Yes, when we find you lying in a pool of gore, we'll search Sims first for the blunt instrument. He's a nasty look in his eye, has our Mr. Sims."

Gadsby gave vent to a bellow of laughter, which occasioned an acid comment from the prefects' table—"Old Gaddie's giving tongue again." Sims sniggered feebly, rather pleased by the suggestion:

"Oh, come, Griffin, I mean to say—What am I to murder Gadsby for? After all, he hasn't got a wife."

"Don't be too sure of that," put in Tiverton, and winced at the still louder peals of laughter elicited from Gadsby by his remark.

"No cherchez la femme for me," said Evans. "If I was looking for a murderer I should look for an egotist. Wrench is my man."

The prospective culprit shot a venomous glance at him over the top of his paper. Evans turned to Tiverton, "Though I can't see any of us qualifying as a victim. It's only in school stories that the staff are always assaulting each other with umbrellas and living in a perpetual welter of bad blood."

"Quite right, Evans," said Gadsby, "all morbid nonsense. We're all matey enough here, old man, aren't we?"

"One big, happy family, as Percy puts it," remarked Tiverton distastefully.

"Well, chaps," Griffin exclaimed, "if murder's done here, it will be committed by me upon the person of that human wart, young Wemyss. Just because he's Percy's nephew he thinks he can boss the whole bloody place. Of all the slimy, overfed specimens—and he's just enough low cunning to keep out of serious trouble himself. But whenever there's a row on he's at the back of it——"

"Like one of Buchan's Napoleons of international crime," put in Evans.

"Napoleons of international——" retorted Griffin obscenely. "I'll wring his neck for him one of these days. Do you know what he did——"

We may safely leave Griffin to his cataloguing of the crimes of the boy Wemyss and tune in to another station, the prefects' table.

"What's the first race this afternoon?"

"The 440, you boob. It's all up on the noticeboard. Oh, I forgot, you can't read."

"Funny boy! I say, Stevens, I heard the Griffin say you might bust the record."

"Oh, rot! I haven't an earthly; anyway, old Simmie will probably muck up the stop-watch like he did last year."

"Talking of Simmie, have you heard what Wemyss did in his French class yesterday?"

"Stale! Tell us something new!"

"But seriously, it's about time that squit Wemyss was suppressed. Pedantic Percy's little pet is getting above himself. He tried to bribe Patterson to beat up Smithers at the hay battle last night."

"Well, are you going to report him to Percy?"

"Be your rank! A-ah, I strongly deprecate idle tale-bearing: I choose my prefects to govern, not to—ha-hum—gossip." This last in a devilishly accurate reproduction of the Rev. Vale's more didactic utterances.

The head of the school, a serious, comely child of thirteen, now delivers judgment:

"No, there's no use applying to Percy. But we might hold a court on him——"

"I'm prosecutor!"

"I'm executioner!"

"Shut up! It isn't a joke. It's a bit thick the way he carries on with old Simmie. Ever since he came——"

"Mother Stevens protecting her little Simmie!"

"Oh, fry your face! I'm sorry for Simmie. He's a born ass, but Wemyss goes a bit too far."

"I say, Stevens, what about getting your brother to set his gang on him? Wemyss is not one of the Black Spot, is he?"

"I don't think so; but they're jolly secret about their members. That's a crazy notion, though. I'll talk to my brother in recess."

"Secret society beats up Headmaster's nephew."

"To hire mercenaries—I may even say thugs, is scarcely the a-ah conduct of a Sudeley Hall prefect or an English gentleman, etc., etc."

Let us turn from the deliberations of the prefects to another table. A small, puffy boy of eleven years or so, with a vicious expression and the usual hallmarks of too much pocket-money, is guzzling his porridge and tormenting his neighbour alternately. It is the abhorrent Wemyss, or more correctly the Hon. Algernon Wyvern-Wemyss. His neighbour is a fat youth, heavy and resentful of eye, incurably slow in speech and action; his parents are farmers and he is here as a sacrifice to their craving for social elevation. There are one or two of him in most schools, born to be baited: the parents of such, Michael was wont to say, should be prosecuted in the Criminal Court for sending them.

"Well, Smithers, how are the live-stock doing?"

"Oh, funny!"

"Fatting 'em up, and killing 'em off?" This was a phrase incautiously used by Smithers in an expansive moment some terms ago, and had not ceased to be used in evidence against him.

"You're fat enough; we'd better kill you off, hadn't we?" Roars of applause.

"Funny, aren't you?"

"Does your father wear leggins?"

"You'd better shut up."

"If he looks like you, I bet the cows kick him when he tries to milk them."

The overwrought Smithers breaks out and clouts his tormentor on the head. The Hon. Wyvern-Wemyss sets up a theatrical screech. Cries of "Fat 'em up and kill 'em off!" "Go it," "Prime Beef," etc., from all round. And Tiverton comes wearily down to put an end to this tableau of original sin.

One more conversation and our prologue will be over. Stevens minor, the dictator (title derived from Evans' modern history teaching) of the Black Spot society, leans close and whispers to his lieutenant, a cheerful, chubby infant, Ponsonby:

"This afternoon: immediately after lunch: in Mouldy's hut: private conclave: password 'Dead Man's Chest,' countersign—'Bottle of rum.' "

"But, you fool," hisses the lieutenant, "we're supposed to be in the Day Room then."

"We can easily oil out: there's no roll-call. It's a life or death matter."

It is a couple of hours later. Michael has a period off. He fills a pipe and walks down the long passage between class-rooms that lead out to the grounds. On either side of him arise sounds of education, curiously antiphonal in effect; a strident, confident recitative from the master, alternating with a treble solo or unison passage. In Sims' room something half-way between a marathon of coloratura sopranos and a witches' sabbath seems to be taking place. Michael shrugs his shoulders and passes on. Tiverton's rather petulant tones on his left: on his right Wrench is teaching the youngest form—a fluky, spasmodic voice; but he is doing it well; he has a gift. I must be nicer to him, thinks Michael. But how nightmare-ish these disembodied voices sound. And no doubt mine sounds just as repellent; though I flatter myself that I speak to boys in my natural voice. Anyway, it can't be as bad as that hectoring drawl of Percy's. No, I don't like the man, I definitely do not like the man. What on earth did darling Hero go and marry him for?

He emerged into the airy sunlight, lit his pipe, and strolled down the asphalt path between Big Field and the Hay Field. Mould, the groundsman, was white-washing afresh the lines of the running track. Big circular stacks of hay, hollow in the middle, reminded him of yesterday's hay battle. A good romp. To-morrow they would be dismantled and carted. He walked to the end of the path where the grounds were bounded by a thicket, and turned back. Passing behind the school block and the back of the headmaster's house he came to the high brick wall of the private garden. At the far end of this, where a shrubbery ran close to the outer side of the wall, was Hero's pillarbox. Just like her, he thought —not for the first time—her strange mixture of madcap play and reckless loving, to have chosen this romantic line of communication. He looked round once, his heart beating quicker, annoyed by the word "furtive" entering his head, took out a loose brick, transferred a piece of paper from the cavity to his pocket, and replaced the brick. Then he walked back and sat down on a seat by the Big Field, and read her note.

> "Darling, I shall be in the Vth form haystack during lunch to-morrow. Yes, highly imprudent, isn't it? But please come. I must see you. I *must see* you. H."

He sat there, content to feel happy, till the bell rang for recess. Then he went in to the Common Room. Surely they must be able to read his secret on his face, see that he was walking in an air of glory? Wasn't Tiverton looking at him in a rather peculiar way? He endeavoured to compose his features into a workaday expression. Unsuccessfully, it seemed.

"Have you taken to Kruschen, or what is it?" said Tiverton.

"No, I've just had an hour off."

Griffin came up to him, "Will you change the chaps after lunch? I want to have a last look round in case Mouldy has committed any gaffes. Oh, and I say, Sims wants to know if you'll take on the stop-watch this year."

"Certainly, if he really doesn't want to—are you sure, Sims?"

"Yes, I'd really rather you did. I made rather a bloomer of it last year. I mean, I get so excited that I forget to press the button."

"All right, then: but I shall probably commit some solecism myself."

"Well, for God's sake don't commit it during the 440," said Griffin, "I'm backing Stevens for a record. Will any one offer me three to one against? None? Have you no sporting instincts? Two to one, then?"

"Done," said Wrench.

On which immoral note this chapter may very well close.

Chapter II

LYRIC AND ELEGIAC

"In the morning, in the morning,
In the happy field of hay,"

was lilting in Michael's mind as he hurried out of the buildings, having seen every one sitting down safely to lunch and made appropriate excuses for his own non-attendance. The kitchen windows did not give on to the hayfield. Of course, there might be a servant wandering about in the class-rooms at the back. Well, if they see us, they see us. Let them. It's about time we had a show-down. The possibility gave Michael a warm, excited feeling inside, like brandy. He was a natural fatalist—the type of person who, rather lacking in personal initiative, welcomes the feeling of having definite action imposed upon him by circumstances. He gave one look at the blank rows of windows and stepped quickly through the gap in its walls into the haystack.

Hero was there already, in a green dress, with a packet of sandwiches at her side. She was fresh and straight as the green corn. Michael drew her down and kissed her, with the scent of hay in his nostrils. A little stream of wind flowed into their sanctuary, blowing her golden hair against his cheek.

"Darling, you *are* crazy. You'll be asking me to meet you under Percy's study table next."

"Do you mind?"

"I love you, my sweet."

"I think you'd better stop kissing me now. I want to eat my lunch. There are some sandwiches here for you, too."

"But 'I on honey dew have fed.' "

"My dear, you are lovely. No one else could carry off a remark like that."

"Leaving that aside for a moment, what explanation have you given to the authorities for this picnic?"

"I told Percy that I wanted to have my lunch out in the sun. He's used to my fantastic behaviour by now."

"You know, I feel rather bad, the way we talk about him—as though he was your aunt, or a dog, or something."

"Yes, I suppose it is rather awful. Of course, I've never loved him; but since I have loved you, I do feel much more kindly to him. It sounds very wicked, somehow, but there it is."

"Just like a woman, making the best of both worlds." He spoke lightly, but was aware that some hidden motive of antagonism or jealousy had caused the words. She felt it, too.

"Darling, that was a cruel thing to say."

He took her hand, with a quick impulsive gesture.

"I know. I'm sorry, my beautiful. But why, why did you marry him?"

"Panic: sheer panic. Michael, you don't know what a craving women have at times for comfort, reassurance, the feeling of firm ground beneath one's feet."

"And now you've gone out of your depth again."

"But I feel different now. I've got you beside me, and it makes me seem bouyant and much stronger. I don't think I could be a coward again, unless you stopped loving me."

"Hero, you're much braver than I am."

"I don't know. One can't really tell till the emergency comes along, can one? I wish sometimes that some crashing big one would turn up, and cut this tangle we've got tied up in."

Michael stroked the feathery down of her arm; said tentatively: "What do you think about this divorce business? Would Percy——?"

"Dear, we've had this out before. I'm not sure, but I think it's a thing he would be hopelessly obstinate over. And anyway, I'm not going to ruin your career."

"My career!" broke in Michael bitterly: "an assistant master in a preparatory school. God help us! Don't you understand that if I was Prime Minister, Poet Laureate, Admiral of the Fleet, and Editor of the *Times,* I'd rather have my career ruined by you than live without you. The trouble is, I've no money: none of your 'comfort and reassurance.' "

Tears started in Hero's eyes.

"Oh, my sweet, I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean that. This business has just got me down. But, Hero, you would like us to be more than lovers, to be married, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let's tell him. Please. After all, I'm not a half-wit. I'm sure I could get some sort of a job. I might even degrade myself to writing novels."

"You sweet; let's hope it needn't be as bad as that. But be patient. I'm going away to-morrow, for two months. I've promised my mother. I'll think it out by myself then. I can't think when you're so close to me. And in August I'll write and tell——"

"Hero, I love you. I leave it all to you. Don't let's waste any more time talking. They'll be out of dinner soon."

So they turned to each other and kissed for a long time. Then Hero went in. And after a little Michael walked towards the thicket, hugging his pain and happiness to himself.

It is two-fifteen p.m. The Rev. and Mrs. Vale are standing at the far gate, welcoming the first arrivals of the parents. Michael Evans, Esq., B.A., has just supervised the boys' changing; sent this one to the matron for a clean pair of trousers, found the lost stocking of that one, adjured A. not to go out without his hat and B. not to carry that large duck's egg in his pocket. He has also answered in ringing tones and the negative no less than fourteen separate and consecutive queries "need we wear sweaters, sir?" All this has been done in the midst of a shindy like a rookery ten times amplified, for discipline is relaxed to-day, and the silence rules abandoned. As a matter of fact, Michael has noticed this uproar no more than a city-dweller notices the sounds of traffic. The preparatory schoolmaster soon learns the knack of retiring into a kind of sound-proof shell: if he fails to learn it, he either takes to drink or goes crazy.

Neat in their clean white shorts and bright blue blazers and stockings, the boys stream out on to the field. Those who are expecting their parents move off separately and with restraint towards the far gate. As each recognises father or mother, his pace quickens involuntarily for a step or two, then is controlled to a self-conscious sedateness. Only the very youngest ones run. Michael sees Griffin approaching him, with an exercise book and a large pistol. He is wearing a double-breasted grey flannel suit and looks murderous.

"Who were you thinking of shooting?"

"Can you believe it? That moron, Mouldy, put up one too many sets of hurdles?"

"I can well believe it. Look out, here comes Gadsby. Let's move off."

But Gadsby, borne along on a strong gale of whisky fumes, caught them up and held them in the doldrums of his conversation till they were rescued by Percy fussing up to Griffin with inquiries about the tape.

Michael moved away with alacrity to where Tiverton was standing, looking very cool and dapper.

"I see you've just escaped."

"Really that man makes me despair of my profession," exclaimed Michael.

"Preparatory schoolmasters," announced Tiverton sententiously, "fall into two categories—the Old Contemptibles and the Young Objectionables. Gadsby and I are included in the former class, yourself and Wrench in the latter."

"This station will now close down," replied Michael rudely.

"I say," he went on, "old Simmie's had a wash and brush-up, hasn't he?" He pointed to where Sims, in a suspiciously creased brown suit of antique workmanship, was talking with a parent.

"Yes, he's brought out that suit for Sports Day every year since I can remember. His contribution to the universal gaiety."

Michael craned over the assembling heads to catch a glimpse of Hero. There she was, in a cluster of animated females and deferentially inclining males. A gust of unreasonable anger swept over Michael. He hated it, seeing her at home in a different world from his own; so withdrawn from him and lively and socially competent. His anger transferred itself to the company in general. The spectacle of all this painted, feathered, complacent, chattering flock made him feel sick inside. It was to maintain this portentous scum that millions sweated or starved beneath the surface. "The fine flower of civilisation": but they hadn't even looks to justify them. The women were powdered, jerky skeletons; and the men like lost sheep.

"The British bourgeoisie is beginning to have rather a hunted look in its eye, don't you think?"

"If you're going to talk politics you'd better foregather with young Wrench," snorted Tiverton.

"Thank you, but I'd rather not. Where is he, by the way?"

"Dunno. I've not seen him for some time. I expect he's crouched over his illustrated copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin.*"

"Really, Tiverton, you have a most unhealthy imagination. Oh, Sweeny's just going to ring his bell. I must go over to the finish: got to time this race."

The 440 was run on a circular course twice round, the start and the finish being opposite to where the main body of the spectators stood. The boys began to shout for their favourites. "Go it, Stevens!" "Come on, Anstruther!" "Wilkinson! Wilkinson!" A large-eared, bespectacled boy was giving, not too *sotto voce,* a faithful rendering of a wireless commentator to an admiring group of friends. "This is the Sudeley Hall sports ground. The 440 yards race is about to commence. They are taking off their blazers. They are lining up. Where is Stevens? I can't see Stevens. Yes, there he is. He has the outside berth. The favourite has the outside berth. Mr. Griffin is officiating with the pistol—Mr. Edward Griffin, the celebrated gunman. Will you speak a few words into the microphone, Mr. Griffin? No, perhaps it's as well that he should not. Now! They are going down on their marks! In a moment you will hear the pistol. Hallo, what's happening? I can't quite see. (Get out of the light, Biles, you little tick!) Stevens is sitting down. Oh, he is doing up his shoelaces. Now they're ready again. On your marks! Get set! Hallo! Old Griff has got the pistol jammed. Now it's right. On your marks! Get set! Go!! That was the starting-pistol you heard. They are rounding the first corner. Anstruther is in the lead. Bravo, Anstruther!" Here the violently cultured voice broke off, and was replaced by the owner's natural shrill screams: "Come on Stevens! Steeevens!"

It was a great race. Michael, in the appalling days to come, was to remember it vividly and gratefully, as front line soldiers in the Great War remembered some scene, cricket on a village green, a farmhouse tea, shire horses standing up grandly against the skyline—which somehow grew to become their vital link with sanity and England. The brown-green short grass; the greyhound grace of the runners; the feel of the stop-watch hot in his hands; Anstruther's grim tenure of the lead round the last bend and Stevens, white in the face, coming up with a superlative rush of speed and passing him three yards before the tape. A set of pictures that was to recur again and again to Michael, as though to a man drowning, at the last crisis of breath.

Michael had automatically clicked the watch, smiling uncontrollably, tears pricking his eyes. He became aware of a hand squeezing his elbow. He looked down and saw Sims, trembling with excitement, his usually dull eyes sparkling behind his spectacles. He felf a ridiculous wave of affection for the little man. "By jove," Sims was saying, "what a race! I say, has he beaten the record?" Only then did Michael remember to look at the watch's hand. Yes! He'd beaten it. By a fifth of a second. Every one crowded round. The time was chalked up on the blackboard, "a school record" underneath it. Yells and clapping from the whole ground. The hero was practically winded again by dozens of hands clouting him on the back.

The sports ran their course. Parents began to get bored and move about in gossiping groups. The distinguished local resident stood up uneasily behind an array of silver cups, and drew shaky parallels between running and citizenship, patriotism, Christianity and other abstract themes. More cheers and backslapping. At four-thirty it was all over. The parents had retired, some to tea with the headmaster, others to stuff their children in the neighbouring village. The remnant of the boys and the staff went in to their more frugal meal, unconscious of the fact that one of their number had been lying dead for some time, his face hideously black and his tongue clenched between grinning teeth, not a hundred yards away.

Tea is over. Sims, Evans, Gadsby and Wrench are sitting about in the Common Room, in various attitudes of exhaustion. Griffin has gone out to supervise the clearing away of the sports apparatus.

"Well," said Gadsby expansively, "that's over. It's extraordinary how good a cup of tea tastes after a hot afternoon in the sun. Jove, we'll not see a race like that 440 for a good few days to come—eh, Evans?"

"No; it was certainly a race and all."

Wrench lit a cigarette. "The way Stevens caught him up on the last bend! A jolly good effort."

"Why, old man, he caught him in the straight, surely," protested Gadsby.

"Yes, I know. But he was coming up on the bend fast, wasn't he? Or wasn't he?" Wrench was grievously addicted to obsolete society slang.

"Didn't see you at the beginning of the race, Wrench?" said Sims. "Where were you standing?"

Wrench leant over to flick his ash into the grate, "Oh, I was gadding around. Acquiring merit with parents and all that."

Tiverton came in. He had been doing the rounds. As he opened the door a piercing shriek was raised in the passage: "Wemyss! Wemyss!" Then a snatch of conversation. "Where is that squit, Wemyss. I want to borrow some cash off him. He's always rolling." "I expect——" The door closed. Tiverton came in and sat down, saying:

"Roll-call's at seven, isn't it?"

"You on duty, Tiverton? Don't envy you the job. Half these little devils who've been out with their parents will be sick as cats," said Gadsby.

"And Tiverton can follow them about with a spade and bucket," added Wrench coarsely.

"Ah, tchah."

But at seven o'clock it appeared that the excitement of the day was by no means over. To Tiverton, calling the roll in the Day Room, one name failed to respond.

"Walters?" "Sir!"

"Ward?" "Sir!"

"Wyvern-Wemyss?"

"WYVERN-WEMYSS!"

"Does any one know anything about Wemyss?"

Several *sotto voce* suggestions were put forward: "Yes, he's a worm." "He's probably throwing up into Percy's wastepaper basket." "Or boozing at the Cock and Feathers." Nothing more constructive or audible being advanced, Tiverton asked: "Did he go out with relations?"

Silence.

"Come along," said Tiverton irritably. "He must have told some one whether he was going out or not."

A small boy at the back stood up and every head turned round towards him, as though he had them on strings.

"Please, sir, he t-told me he thought he w-would not be going out."

"When did he tell you this?"

"Yesterday, sir."

A babel of voices arose.

"Sir, do you think he's run away?"

"Good riddance."

"Please, sir, perhaps he's been kidnapped, sir."

"STOP TALKING! Sit quietly at your desks. Prefects, see that there's no ragging about."

Tiverton went through to the private side and found the headmaster in his study.

"Wemyss is absent from roll-call."

The Rev. Vale turned round sharply from his desk.

"Absent? My nephew? But that's impossible."

Tiverton enlarged wearily.

"He failed to answer his name. None of the boys seem to know anything about it. Had he leave out?"

"Leave out? No, I don't remember—I'll just make sure."

He opened a drawer and referred to a printed list.

"No. No one was taking him out. This is most extraordinary. Unless Urquhart drove over—but he would have let me know. Have you ascertained whether he is anywhere on the premises?" Vale was quite flustered.

"No, I thought it best to inform you before any sort of search was instituted," replied Tiverton in his most official tones.

"Er, yes. Quite right. What do you, er, suggest?"

"Perhaps we should ask Matron first. He may have felt ill and gone to the sickroom."

The matron was sent for, a large, imperturbable woman.

"Master Wyvern-Wemyss? No, he has not come to me."

The headmaster, who had by now regained some of his composure, directed Tiverton to keep the boys in the Day Room and the matron to organise the servants for a thorough search of the buildings. He himself hurried along to the Common Room, where the masters were at supper.

"My nephew, Wyvern-Wemyss is not to be found. Can any one throw any light——?"

No one could.

"The matron is supervising a search over the house. Perhaps it would be well to look over the grounds too, in case he has met with some accident. Could you arrange, Gadsby——?"

"Certainly. I suppose you will be ringing up the police?" added Gadsby tactlessly.

"The police?" Vale raised his eyebrows.

"Well, I mean to say, he might have run away."

"And for what reason, pray, should he take such an extraordinary course? Are you suggesting that he had grounds for——? Really, Mr. Gadsby."

Gadsby abased himself, and the search began. Gadsby himself went over the Big Field; Sims into the far field: Evans was allotted the garden, Griffin and Wrench the thicket. Haymakers had just come to work late on the hayfield, so it was not considered necessary for the staff to search there, or advisable to broadcast a possible scandal amongst the labourers.

Michael wandered about disconsolately for ten minutes or so, thinking of Hero, cursing the search for a farce and peering perfunctorily into bushes. When they assembled again, it was without tidings of the missing Wemyss. Matron and her forces had been equally unsuccessful; and the headmaster, deciding that Gadsby's tactless hypothesis must now be entertained, rang up the village constable. A description of the lad was given, and the constable promised to make inquiries in the village and to communicate with the superintendent at Staverton, so that a watch might be set on all adjacent stations and bus-routes. Further questioning by Tiverton in the Day Room had elicited the fact that no one seemed to have set eyes on Wemyss in the course of the afternoon, so it appeared that he might really have taken the incomprehensible liberty of removing himself from the Rev. Vale's tutelage.

But the masters had scarcely settled down again in the Common Room when there was heard a clatter of boots outside, and a figure passed the window at a shambling run going towards the headmaster's private door.

A few minutes after this, a message came requesting Tiverton's presence in the study. And almost before Gadsby had time to fire off a salvo of rhetorical questions, Tiverton returned, dazed and white in the face.

"Percy wants you all in his study. They've found Wemyss in the hayfield. He's been strangled. They found him when they were dismantling the haystacks. In one of the haystacks."

Chapter III

ENTER A POSSE

Michael's first sensation was one he had several times experienced in his boyhood, when at chapel a notice was given out that "the whole school will assemble immediately after service" and one knew that a really serious row was on and said to oneself "Thank God, it's not me." Now, as then, he felt as though his heart had dropped into his stomach and was fluttering there uneasily. He became aware, even, of feeling a curious surprise that he had nothing to do with that luckless body in the hayfield, a relief that it was not he who had committed the crime—as though the point had been undecided till now. Then his mind started working furiously and irrationally, like an engine accelerated with the clutch in. Well, at any rate this will prevent Hero going away. It's an ill wind. But why should any one? And who? WHO? The hayfield. Why the hayfield? Why not? In the morning, in the morning, in the happy field of hay. Only it's the evening. Tiverton looked bad. Mouth twitching, like a baby going to cry. I wonder whereabouts in the hayfield. Nuisance; police about, I suppose; will mess up the work. Oh, of course, he said in one of the haystacks. How lovely Hero looked. Her body is the sunlight of my flesh. That's blank verse. Not a very good line either. One of the haystacks. Which one? Come on, say it out. Not the Fifth form stack, I hope. I hope not. Why, what on earth does it matter to you which? Five haystacks. Odds are four to one against. Please don't let it be there. Not where Hero and I were. Oh, dry up. Pull yourself together. The happy field of——

He found himself in the study. The headmaster was there, a queer bluish tinge overlaying his ruddy cheeks, spasmodically putting on and taking off his pince-nez. He glanced round at his colleagues. They were restlessly silent, like people seeing off a train. Tiverton was not there. Michael mumbled some condolements to Vale, who replied: "Thank you, Evans, thank you. I—this shocking disclosure has quite unmanned me. Such a thing has never occurred in my school before." Griffin was not sufficiently overawed by the occasion to refrain from an outrageous wink at Michael. Vale went on, his habitual pedantry of phrase contrasting oddly with his broken, almost appealing tones. "The poor, unfortunate boy! It passes my comprehension why any one should want to—to, er, make away with him! The scandal! The publicity! I have asked Tiverton to make it known among the boys that my nephew has met with an accident, a fatal accident. It may yet be possible to prevent the—a-ah—facts from reaching the parents. I have rung up Dr. Maddox: he will be here shortly: and the police, of course. I should be obliged, Griffin, if you would meet the doctor when he comes and take him to—I do not feel capable myself. If you have any suggestions, any of you, as to other immediate steps that might be taken——?"

Michael realised that Vale was asking to be relieved of his responsibilities, and said: "Perhaps it would be advisable for me—for Sims and myself to go out and see that the men do not interfere with the—the scene of the crime. I believe that the police would wish things to remain as far as possible as they were found."

"Certainly, Evans, certainly. An excellent suggestion."

"Excuse me, headmaster, but should we not—er—get in touch with the unfortunate boy's relatives?"

Vale, relieved of the necessity for action, was in a mood to resent any further encroachment upon his authority.

"My dear Sims, it should be unnecessary for me to have to assure you that any such very obvious steps would have been taken by me, if the situation had called for them. As it happens, I am the boy's nearest living relative myself. If you have no more constructive proposals to make, perhaps you will accompany Evans and give him what assistance you can."

Sims blushed and Michael felt awkward. Vale, feeling better for his act of devastation, indicated that the audience was over, and Sims and Evans went out of doors. Michael, fearing the worst, forced himself to look towards the hayfield. A group of men with pitchforks was gathered round one of the haystacks. Yes, the Fifth form one. It would be. Half of the structure had been demolished and the last sunlight shone sadly on the red and yellow of the new wagon beside it. The labourers stepped back a pace as Evans and Sims approached. Where part of the wall had been lifted, untidily crumpled, with pieces of straw still clinging to its clothing, lay the body of Algernon Wyvern-Wemyss. He was not a pretty sight. The manner of his death had robbed him of that last consolation. Michael turned away, feeling sick. Sims was staring fascinated at the body. The foreman of the labourers walked heavily up to Michael, touching his hat:

"Tur'ble business, this, sur. Looks like he been murdered. Bill, here, he lifts up stook on fork. 'Gor,' he says, 'one of they boys has left his coat underneath here.' We lifts two more stooks, and there he was, sur. 'Gor,' says Bill, 'it's a carpse.' Gave us a fair turn, I can tell'ee, sur; ar, that it did."

"Yes, it must have done," said Michael inadequately. "By the way, did you move it at all?"

"No, sur. Bill, he says, 'Us had better shift the poor young gentleman and make him more comfortable like.' 'Bill,' I says, 'thou'rt a bloody chump. Leave un alone. Police woa'nt have 'ee meddlin' with murdered carpses.' So I sent him in to tell Reverend Vale as how one of his boys was in hayfield. Ar, that was the size o' the matter."

"Quite right. I should think it would probably be best if you sent your men back to the village. They can do no good for the present, and the police will want to search the field as it is. If you and—er—Bill could wait till they come——?"

The foreman gave the necessary directions and his small party broke up. Wrench came half running out of the school. Michael surprised a curious look on his face as he approached. Ruminating on it later, the best analysis he could come to was that it presented a kind of alternation of relief and fear. He had no time for analysis at the moment, as Wrench, after one brief glance at the contents of the stack, retired a few paces and began to retch. He felt himself being drawn aside by Sims.

"I say, Evans, do you know anything about this sort of thing? I mean, he looks as if he'd been dead—for quite a long time, somehow."

Michael had got the same impression, though he could not say why. Wemyss did look so very dead. Sims' remark must have reached Wrench's ear, for the latter turned and said in a high tense voice:

"Well? What of it? What are you getting at?"

"Well, you see, I've just remembered that Griffin was out in the field over there this evening till we began the search, and he would have seen if—if it had happened then. And before that was the sports. So the only time left is between lunch and two-thirty—that is, if he *was* at lunch." Sims concluded his involved argument with a mildly triumphant look.

"Well?" snapped Wrench.

"What I'm getting at is that I suppose we'll all be asked where we were then. Alibis, you know," he added brightly.

The other two were silent for rather a long time, each thinking his own thoughts. Then Wrench spoke in a vicious tone.

"Are you one of the Secret Police, or what? All this panic about alibis just because you have had a verbal inspiration, I suppose it must be, that he has been dead a long time. No doubt you've a perfect alibi yourself?"

"As a matter of fact, now I come to think of it, I don't think I have got a very good one," Sims replied more slowly.

"Ah, well, cheer up," said Michael with forced heartiness, "the real murderer always has a perfect alibi. It's us innocent ones who are never able to cook one up."

All the same, he thought to himself, it would not be funny at all if Sims is right. He saw his objection to the body being found on his and Hero's rendezvous, which had before been merely aesthetic, assuming a very different significance. Uneasy speculation was interrupted by the arrival of Griffin with Dr. Maddox. The school doctor was a round, bouncing little man, exuding urbanity and antisepsis. Michael might have been amused at another time by the delicate way his patent-leather-shod feet pranced through the dewy stubble.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," the doctor said, restraining himself with difficulty—the fancy occurred to Michael—from pirouetting up to the corpse on his shining toes. "Very sad. Poor young laddie. Well, well!" He knelt down beside the body, putting his black bag in front of him, and got to work. The others looked away. A feeble and grotesque pun, turning on the word "examinations," arose unbidden in Michael's mind. Griffin was screwing his heel round in the earth, rather in the manner of one preparing for a place-kick. Wrench threw one or two hasty glances over his shoulder, and turned back with a visible shudder. "O, they looked at one another. And they looked away," Michael found himself muttering.

"What's that?" said Wrench.

"Nothing."

Dr. Maddox straightened himself up, with a rueful glance at his soaking knees.

"Dear me, dear me!" he exclaimed. "Most extraordinary—and, er, tragic. No question about it, I'm afraid. Murder or manslaughter. He seems to have been throttled first by his assailant's hands. These bruises, you see. Then a thin cord tied round his neck. You will observe the red line: it has sunk in rather deeply."

No one cared to verify the statement. Michael wondered how long he would be able to refrain from asking the question that was on the tip of at least three tongues. After an awkward silence, it was finally Sims who took the plunge.

"How long would you say he had been dead, doctor?"

They were kept on tenterhooks for half a minute, while the doctor disported himself in a stream of technicalities.

"To put it more simply," he concluded, " rigor mortis is fully established. That means he has been dead for more than four hours; probably for six. Of course, if the body has been lying under hay all the time, that would tend to defer the process and thus extend the period. You understand we can only fix the time very roughly: I should put it between four and seven hours ago as the outside limits."

Wrench moved his right hand abruptly towards his left wrist, paused in the act, then thought better of it and uncovered the face of his wrist watch.

"Five to eight."

At least three heads did lightning calculations, but before the results could be compared, a murmur of talk was heard and a procession appeared out of the side door, led by the headmaster and a gigantic pale-faced man, the superintendent from Staverton. Behind these two straggled a sergeant, the Sudeley constable, and two other men, one bearing a camera.

"This is Superintendent Armstrong," announced the headmaster. "Superintendent, I dare say you know Dr. Maddox. These gentlemen are members of my staff—Mr. Sims, Mr. Evans, Mr. Griffin, Mr. Wrench."

"Pleased to meet you," the officer nodded perfunctorily. Polite murmurs from the members of the Rev. Vale's staff.

The headmaster continued: "Should you wish for any assistance I am sure these gentlemen——"

"Thank you, sir," interrupted Armstrong, with an indecent disregard for the rules of academic conversation, "I will certainly ask for what assistance I may need. If you gentlemen will all go indoors for the present. I shall ask for statements from you in the course of the evening. Who was it who found the body?"

The foreman stepped forward.

"You can wait. And I should like a word with you now, Dr. Maddox. Good-evening, gentlemen."

At this pointed dismissal, the gentlemen trailed back into the school; Griffin and Evans were several paces behind the rest. Griffin whispered:

"Percy will get an apoplexy if he has much more of this rough stuff applied to him. What do you think of our Mr. Armstrong?"

"I do *not* like him."

"Personally, I think he's a——"

"You may well be right."

Supper was a silent affair. The boys were subdued and had their ears open for any crumbs of information that might fall down from the high table. But none did, for the masters had instructions to keep the real facts to themselves for the present—not that there was much chance of concealing them, as Griffin remarked, with a posse of police tramping about outside the back windows. Michael was glad of the absence of the usual chatter, for he was concentrating all his powers on a difficult decision. As soon as supper was over he went through to the private side in search of Hero. Luckily he found her alone, sitting rather forlornly over an uneaten meal. She looked up at him with a twist at the corner of her mouth, half provocative, half pathetic.

"Isn't this very imprudent, dear Michael?"

"Hero, listen. I was not with you at lunch to-day. You were alone in the haystack."

"What on earth——?"

"Don't you see, darling, they're bound to ask us all where we were; and Maddox says the murder was probably done between one and four."

"But we can give each other alibis."

"Yes, and blow the lid off everything."

Hero's smile sweetened her mocking words:

"Oh, I see, Michael being chivalrous."

They heard footsteps coming along the passage. Michael spoke urgently.

"Promise."

"Very well," she whispered, adding certain reservations in her own mind. "I'll look out something for you," she said, as the door opened and her husband came in. He surveyed them with a strained and faraway look in his eyes.

"Oh, Evans; the superintendent is going to interview the staff individually after the boys go to bed. Will you hold yourself in readiness?"

Michael mumbled something and went out. He felt vaguely irritated. Hero's little deceptions were still apt to fret him.

"What did Evans want?" Vale was saying.

"One or two properties for the play he's doing with his form."

"Mm. I don't know that I approve of all this dressing-up in school. And this is a most unsuitable time to be thinking of play-acting. Hero, it is terrible. I have given my whole life to the school. Fifteen years: and now this happens. A boy to whom I stood more especially *in loco parentis.*"

"Why, nobody could say it was your fault."

"Of course not," he replied irritably, "that's not the point at all. But you know perfectly well that any suspicion of scandal is enough to ruin a place like this. And where shall we be then?"

"Well, I suppose we shan't starve. We come in for some money now, I take it." Hero was exasperated into a callousness of phrase that quite startled her.

"My dear, that was a most brutal and uncalled-for remark. As though I—really, Hero, you can scarcely be yourself to-night. I should have expected a little more sympathy from my wife on such an occasion as this."

Hero sighed wearily. The old appeal for pity. And the trouble was that it always worked, operating on the part of a woman's nature that was beyond her control. No, she said firmly to herself, I love Michael. I'm not going to be emotionally bullied into doling it out to any one else. Love is not indiscriminate charity. She looked more dispassionately at her husband. He was quite white, and breathing heavily. She said:

"I'm sorry. I expect I'm a bit overwrought myself."

"Yes, yes, it is a difficult time for us all."

She tried to laugh him out of his concern, saying lightly:

"Especially for us who are under suspicion."

"Under suspicion? Are you mad, Hero. Good heavens, you mean the money. Why, you don't really suppose——?"

"Well, the police will presumably look for a motive."

Hero still was speaking in jest; but, looking up, she was dismayed to see her husband's face taut with fear. God, she thought, he's going to break down in a minute. One might have supposed he really had done it himself.

Two small and highly malleable noses are pressed against the window of the Third form class-room, which gives on to the hayfield. Their owners—the intrepid leaders of the Black Spot—with their usual flair for smelling out or getting into trouble, have detected the presence of the detectors and have cut evening prayers in order to keep an eye on their activities. They are busy getting what the papers call an "exclusive story."

"Look, Stevens, that must be the head policeman—that one in the flat cap."

" 'Inspector,' you ass, not 'head policeman,' " observed the dictator crushingly.

"Isn't he a whopper? He's fatter than the Griffin."

"I bet he's not so strong, though. Do you remember Griff holding me and Pongo above his head—one in each hand?"

"Jolly hard cheese on Wemyss; though he was a bit of a worm. I wonder what the accident was."

"Accident? You poor simp, you don't really think it was an accident, do you? They wouldn't have a crowd of bobbies all over the place if it was an accident."

"Crumbs! Do you mean——?"

"Murder. Mm. Bumped off. That's what I mean. And what's more," added the dictator darkly, "I've got an idea who——"

"Oh, whoopee! Tell me! Are we going to track him down? Who is it?"

"Don't breathe all over the glass, you boob, I can't see." Ponsonby rubbed the moisture away with his sleeve. "I shan't tell you yet," Stevens proceeded, "you'd only go yapping it all round the school."

"Oh, Stevens, I wouldn't really—I say, what's that bloke with the camera doing?"

"Photographing the remains. We always do it in murder cases. Gosh, don't you see, that proves it's murder."

Ponsonby goggled in admiration of his leader's flight of logic; then doubled his nose up against the pane.

"Look, they're lifting him up. They're going to put him in the hay cart. I can't see any blood, can you? Doesn't he look horrid? I think I'm going away."

The dictator was made of sterner stuff. "You go away if you like. I'm going to see this through. Quick! Come back! They're turning the hay over: looking for clues, I expect." Ponsonby returned to the window. "Now they're driving the cart away. Wonder where they're taking him. Cemetery, I suppose."

"Do you think we'll get a half-holiday for the funeral?"

"Might. Gosh, look, the inspector's found something. He's taking it up in his handkerchief. Finger-prints, you know."

"Oh, flip! Will he take ours?"

"Shut up! I can't see—it's getting so dark. It's a bullet, perhaps."

"No, it's a pencil—a silver pencil."

Chapter IV

VIVA VOCE

The sun has finally abdicated his noonday eminence, unperturbed by dark deeds, fear or passion. He looks in at the dusty Common Room, where masters are chatting spasmodically, trying without much success to cover up with commonplace this sudden chasm in their lives. The police have quartered the hayfield now and found whatever was to be found, and the hay cart is carrying its normal load. A line of lapwings flies along the far edge of the playing field, their black and white showing alternately like ripples of light or waves on a moonlit lake. Tiverton, watching them out of the Day Room window, toys with a mental image of death and life, crime and innocence, black and white. Every one in the school, for that matter, except a few very young boys who are so small that the whole affair passes over their heads, finds his eyes drawn magnetically to the windows and what lies beyond them.

Soon the superintendent comes in to the Day Room. The boys eye him in that deceptively polite, appraising silence with which boys in the mass are wont to receive a stranger. Armstrong looks almost fidgety, if such a human Everest could be said to fidget. But, encouraged by the receptive looks of his audience, he passes his forefinger once round the inside of his collar, assumes his most avuncular expression, and plunges in:

"You have all heard that an unfortunate accident has occurred. I have been sent to inquire into it, and I hope that if any of you young gentlemen can give me assistance, you will do so." He has begun well. The most captious juvenile critic can find nothing to lay hold of here; and the idea of assisting the police has gone down splendidly. The superintendent feels that he is passing this test with honours, and resumes more expansively: "Now all I want to know at present is, did any of you notice whether your playmate was at lunch, or see anything of him afterwards?" An invisible shudder passes over the assembly, starting from the veteran critics of the Fifth form at the back, and communicating itself like a ground-swell to the small boys at the superintendent's feet. Yes, he has put his foot in it all right. One word has changed him from a potential hero to a figure of fun. For some weeks now the word "playmate" is to be a stock joke and a great weapon of offence, and it would take him many more weeks to live down the effect of it. He realises that he has "lost his audience," and ceasing to attempt any further imitation of Agag repeats his questions in a harsh, official tone. Wyvern-Wemyss had not appeared at lunch; several boys had had leave out to lunch with parents, and those who ordinarily sat next to Wemyss assumed that he had leave out too. No, no one had set eyes upon him afterwards, or knew where he had gone. Nor had any one been outside the buildings till just before the sports began. Armstrong may have a kestrel's eye, but he cannot be expected to pick out, amongst eighty boys, a small hand slightly lifted and as quickly lowered at his second question, or two small pairs of features becoming tense and obstinate at his third. He strides down the room and out of the door, rather hurriedly for him—but not so quickly that he escapes the beginning of a short variety turn by a youth with outstanding spectacles and ears, in which the unfortunate word figures as the *pièce de résistance.*

The superintendent is closeted with a headmaster distinctly conscious of the fact that he is being interviewed in his own study, and feeling, no doubt, something like Kronos when Zeus turned up out of the blue and started to put him through his paces.

"Now, sir," the superintendent was saying, "let me see if I've got the facts right so far. The boy was last seen, as far as we know, during the last period of lessons to-day. His absence was not noticed till seven p.m. when a search was instituted. From the evidence of Morley, the foreman of the labourers, it is clear that the body was well concealed."

"It might have been placed there in the course of the evening, any time after the murder," the headmaster added.

"Why, of course, sir; that had not occurred to me," said the superintendent mendaciously, adding in a heavily humorous tone that caused the Rev. Vale to wriggle slightly in his chair, "we shall be having you in the Force before long, sir." He went on: "All your staff been with you for some time, sir?"

"Yes, except for Mr. Wrench; he came last term."

"What sort of a man is this Mr. Wrench?"

"Well—er—I've always found him satisfactory in his teaching capacity. Not a scholar, of course, not a scholar; but conscientious, and a very fair disciplinarian."

"I was not referring to his teaching capacity so much as to his general character." It was curious the way no one seemed to be able to converse with Percival Vale without being infected with his measured mode of speech.

"Oh, his general character? His college gave him a very fair testimonial. I can't say I've come into contact with him a great deal outside our scholastic duties. He strikes me as reserved; and he has a rather regrettable leaning towards aestheticism. I doubt if his politics are altogether sound. But, of course, he is not quite a—not quite, a-ah—that is——" The headmaster broke off, looking a trifle confused.

"Not quite a gentleman?" Armstrong suggested. "Well, that may be said of quite a number of us. However, to resume. The search proved unsuccessful, and you got in touch with us. May I ask, sir, by the way, why you did not ring up the police as soon as the boy was found to be missing? We had no word from you till seven-thirty."

"I was unaware at the time that my nephew was murdered," replied the headmaster acidly. It was the superintendent's turn to wriggle slightly in his chair.

"You imagined that he had just run away, or something, I take it," he counter-attacked.

"Your second hypothesis is more correct than your first," returned Mr. Vale. "I supposed that he had met with some accident. My boys are not in the habit of—a-ah—running away."

"No, quite so. And you were first informed of the tragedy at seven twenty-five by Morley, who told you of his discovery?"

"Yes."

"You then sent for Mr. Tiverton and told him to inform the rest of your staff; and you telephoned to Dr. Maddox and the police?"

"That is so."

The telephone rang in the lobby outside. The headmaster began to rise from his chair, but Armstrong lifted a large hand and said:

"Don't trouble yourself, sir. Sergeant Pearson will take the message." The headmaster relapsed into his seat, saying with a rather sickly smile:

"You seem to have garrisoned the place already."

The sergeant entered and told his superior that Dr. Maddox was on the 'phone. After a short conversation Armstrong returned.

"Now, sir," he continued briskly, "may I ask you a few more questions; just a matter of formality?"

"Certainly."

"If you will give me an account of your own movements between one and four."

"Oh, well, let me see. I was in school till quarter to one. Then I signed leave outs till lunch time. In hall till one-thirty."

"All your staff at lunch, sir?"

"Yes. No, I'd forgotten. Evans asked to be excused attendance." Armstrong made some cryptic hieroglyphics in his notebook.

"Give any reason?"

"No, I do not consider it necessary for my staff to——"

"Exactly, sir, and then?"

"I was talking in here with my wife for about a quarter of an hour. After that I went up to my dressing-room and changed. By then it was time to go and meet the parents. To-day was our Sports Day, you see."

"And when did they begin to arrive?"

"Why, about two-fifteen, I suppose. I really don't see what——"

"You were in your dressing-room from one-forty-five to two-fifteen—changing?"

"Well, I dare say I lay down and rested for a part of the time. You cannot expect me to remember every trivial action."

"You will excuse me asking, sir, but have you any one who can confirm this? Servants coming in? Your wife?"

The headmaster bent upon him that look which had quelled many an unruly parent and could reduce small boys to a state of total aphasia. It bent and broke upon the superintendent's adamantine front.

"This is outrageous! I did *not* commit this murder and I *was* in my room from one-forty-five to two-fifteen. If you do not take my word for the one, you are not likely to take it for the other."

"No, sir. We can't afford to take people's words in murder cases. I have my duty to do. If I can't get information from one person, I must try to get it from another." There was an inflexible ring in the superintendent's voice, and Percival Vale recognised it. He said, abruptly, and rather sulkily:

"My wife was in her bedroom for part of the period. It adjoins my dressing-room. We spoke a few words to each other through the door. That's all the proof I can give you."

"About what time would that be?"

"Mrs. Vale came up shortly after two. We went downstairs together."

Armstrong relaxed his moral pressure at this point, and drew the remaining facts from the headmaster comparatively painlessly. These were: that the boy's parents were dead and he was the nearest living relative; that he shared the duties of guardianship with James Urquhart, Esq., solicitor, of Staverton; that no one had asked to take the boy out for the afternoon; and that he was unaware of any one who could possibly want to make away with his nephew. The superintendent also listened graciously to a theory that some tramp must have killed the lad—he was accustomed to have a considerable amount of money, for a boy, in his pockets; and declared that this no doubt was what had happened. It was only after the superintendent had gone out to "have a few words with Mrs. Vale," that the headmaster began to realise, with a nicely balanced blend of indignation and apprehension, that his inquisitor had had him in the hollow of his hand, as Gulliver held the King of Lilliput, and that there had been a sinister absence of inquiry about the extent to which "his nearest living relative" would benefit by the Hon. Algernon Wyvern-Wemyss' death.

The Superintendent Armstrong who interviewed Hero Vale was a very different man from the official inquisitor of Percival Vale. His eyes expressed a polite admiration of her beauty and his voice a polite recognition of the unpleasant circumstances in which she was involved.

"This must have been a severe shock for you, madam. But if you could just answer one or two questions; a matter of routine?"

"Why, of course."

"After lunch—you didn't happen to notice if your nephew was at lunch, did you?"

"No. I couldn't. I wasn't there myself."

The superintendent gently uncrossed his legs, and said in his mildest voice:

"Oh, I hadn't realised that. To be sure. You were lunching out? With friends?"

"No, by myself. I took some sandwiches out—into the hayfield. My husband will tell you I often behave in an eccentric way."

"Quite natural, I'm sure: I mean, to prefer one's meals out of doors on a fine sunny day. I take it you didn't see anything of your nephew—or any one else, while you were in the field?"

"No, I couldn't very well. You see, I was in one of the haystacks—the —I'm afraid it was the one where they found him."

"You don't say. This must make it still more distressing for you. But, really, it's very lucky for us."

"For you?"

"Why, yes. Don't you see, it narrows down the time during which the murder could have been committed. Unless, of course, the body was placed there later."

The superintendent's eyes were twinkling enthusiastically at her, like a benevolent uncle's exhibiting a new toy to his nephew. Hero realised that he was making great efforts to put her at her ease—"did that mean off her guard," she thought—and that he knew she realised it. He continued a trifle brusquely:

"And after that?"

"I went in, just before the end of the boys' lunch. I was with my husband for a bit. Then I was superintending the catering and chairs and things for the sports, till I went up to dress."

"Which would be about——?"

"I went up just after the hall clock struck two."

"Did Mr. Vale go up with you?"

"Oh, no. He was in his dressing-room when I went into my bedroom."

"I see. Thank you very much, Mrs. Vale. I hope I shall not have to trouble you again."

The superintendent was feeling slightly ruffled when he sat down in the morning-room and prepared to interview the staff. He was fortified, however, by the presence of Sergeant Pearson with a large notebook in the background, and a certain solid piece of metal in his own pocket. Tiverton was the victim. He had been in the Common Room the whole time between lunch and two-thirty, except for occasional visits to the Day Room, to see that the boys, who were sitting there till they should be told to change, were doing nothing outrageous.

"Which of the staff were with you?"

"Let me see. Mr. Sims was there most of the time. He went out, at about two o'clock—to change, I think: I didn't notice him after that till just before the first race began."

"You did not go up to change, yourself, sir?"

"No, I had put on my festive garments before lunch."

"What about the other masters?"

"Well, really, I'm not my brother's keeper, you know. They were in and out, most of them. Gadsby, I believe, went in to the village shortly after lunch. Wrench turned up soon after two o'clock and went out again. Evans came in to change the boys: that must have been just before two-fifteen. Who else is there? Oh, yes: Griffin had a cigarette here before he went out to look over the arrangements for the sports. I cannot answer for the headmaster," he added mischievously.

"Did all the masters attend the sports, Mr. Tiverton?"

"Yes, they were all there. I didn't see Wrench till the end of the first race. Talking to parents or something, I believe."

"And you have no suggestions, sir, as to the perpetrator of the crime?"

"No. No—except that I can't conceive what motive any of us could have that makes you inquire so searchingly into our whereabouts."

"A matter of form. Thank you, sir; that will be all for the present," said the superintendent indifferently. "Could you ask Mr. Gadsby to step this way?"

Gadsby came in and embarrassed the superintendent by a hearty handshake. "Well, putting me on the mat, eh? Fire away then."

"If you could just tell me where you were between lunch and the sports, Mr. Gadsby. We have to inquire into these things."

"That's all right, old man. Fullah's got to do his duty. 'S'matter of fact, I popped into the village for a quick one. Have to get primed for these social riots, y'know. Not a society man."

"Quite so, sir. And how quick was the one?"

Gadsby went into a paroxysm of laughter. "Ha! ha! ha! That's a good one. Damned smart. Must tell it to the chaps. Ha! ha! 'How quick was the one?' Well, to tell you the truth, it was quick all right, but more than one. Two or three. Good beer at the Cock and Feathers, and I settled it down with a couple of whiskies. Old Tompkins, keeps the pub, y'know, superintendent; he'll go into the witness-box for me."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir," replied the superintendent playfully, a remark which also went down very well with the hilarious Gadsby. "You were there, how long, sir?" he prompted.

"Left about two-fifteen. No distance in a car" .

"Oh, I see, you were in a car. I see. Then there is only one further question. Can you think of any reason for this boy's being done to death? Ever heard any one threaten to—it might have started as a practical joke on the part of some boys, for instance."

Gadsby leant forward with what Tiverton called "his schoolgirl's confidence" expression. "I don't mind telling you—though it seems a bit hard on the poor little fellow, talking like this just now—most of the school hated him like poison. I wouldn't put it past a good many of them to screw his neck a touch too violently. Funny thing, that: only at breakfast to-day——" he broke off suddenly.

"At breakfast, sir, you were saying?" the superintendent prompted.

"Oh, we happened to be talking about murders, that's all," Gadsby replied lamely. Then, as though feeling that something more was expected of him, "Curious what coincidences you run across every now and then, isn't it, superintendent? I remember in '17——"

But Armstrong was in no mood for reminiscences of that sort. He intercepted the garrulous Gadsby before he could get into his stride, and skilfully elicited from him the substance of that breakfast conversation which had already been recorded. The sergeant scribbled furiously.

It was Sims' turn next. He came hesitatingly into the room, an uncertain smile looking coyly out through his reedy moustache.

"Good-evening. Er—I believe you wished to see me."

"That's right, sir. I have to ask you a few questions. Will you just tell me your movements after lunch to-day?"

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid I've a hopeless memory for that sort of thing. Now, what *did* I do? I went into the Common Room for a bit. Tiverton was there, I remember. Then I changed; upstairs. Then I came down again. I'm afraid this is all rather inadequate."

"Have you any idea what time you came down, sir?"

"Well, it struck two as I was going up the stairs. And one takes about a quarter of an hour to change. So I suppose——"

"I see. You came down about quarter past two. Then you went into the Common Room, didn't you?"

"Yes." Sims shot a quick glance at the superintendent. "No, I'm wrong. Whoever told you? I went outside and had a cigarette."

"Whereabouts did you go?"

"Oh, out at the back. Along by the hayfield, you know. I walked up and down the path. Griffin must have seen me, you know. He was out on Big Field."

Armstrong did not fail to note an apprehensive timbre in the tone of Sims' last statements, but he gave no sign of it.

"Quite. And I take it you saw nothing out of the way?"

"No, of course not. I should have told you. There was no one out on that side of the house but Griffin. Evans came in just as I was at the door."

"Thank you, sir. Then, if you have no suggestions to make, will you be so good as to send along Mr Evans?"

Unless he is lying—no, unless he and Mr. Griffin are in collaboration, and if Mrs. Vale's evidence is correct that would seem to fix the murder between one-thirty and two-fifteen, unless, of course, it was committed somewhere else. Far too many "ifs" and "unlesses," thought Superintendent Armstrong, fingering a certain envelope in his pocket.

"Ah, good-evening; Mr. Evans, isn't it? Have you any theories about this crime?"

Michael was conscious of antagonism; a very faintly contemptuous accent on the word "you" (had some one else been bothering the superintendent with theories?), and a general air of dangerous quiescence in the superintendent's big body slumped back heavily in his chair.

"Me? Oh, Lord, no."

"You have never heard any one threatening to murder this boy?"

"Of course not. Do murderers commonly proclaim their intentions in public?"

The superintendent's brow contracted. He said, "You do not recall a conversation at breakfast to-day?"

"What on earth? Surely you are not suspecting Griffin? It's too ludicrous. Why, any one might talk about screwing a boy's neck. I do myself about twice a week."

"Very well, sir, we'll pass that over." Michael had an uneasy feeling that Armstrong was by no means passing it over. Was he just an ordinary police numskull? No, there was a formidable intelligence in those small eyes. Then why go off on this ridiculous tack about Griffin? Perhaps he is trying to put me off my guard. Be careful.

"Now, just a few formal questions, sir. I am told you were not in school for lunch."

"No, I went out—into the wood beyond the playing fields."

"Did you see Mrs. Vale?"

O God, now it's begun. What has she told him? Chance it.

"No."

"Oh, I thought you might have. She was having lunch in the hayfield."

Thank God. It seems all right so far.

"Did you have anything to eat, sir?"

"Yes, I took some sandwiches with me." That should be safe enough.

"I see. . . . I expect they were busy in the kitchen to-day." The superintendent's voice was just a shade too off-hand. Michael sensed the trap.

"I keep a loaf and butter in my room." Well, so I do. Damn and blast! I should never have said that. I should have waited till he asked. Out of one trap into another. . . . Armstrong, however, made no comment.

"I take it you saw no one in the wood, or on the hayfield?"

"No. Griffin came out not long after the bell rang. He and Mould, the groundsman, were in Big Field all the time, I think, after that."

This was going fine. Nothing to be afraid of in this fat official in blue. Just my guilty conscience.

"I understand, then, that you didn't go into the hayfield at all, sir? You were in the wood from one-thirty to about two-fifteen?"

"Yes."

The superintendent creaked forward in his chair, rummaging in a pocket, and pulled forth an envelope; allowed something to roll out of it on to the table in front of him.

"And how do you account for this pencil of yours being found in the haystack where the body was? These are your initials, aren't they?"

Hell and damnation! That's torn it. Must have dropped out when I was kissing Hero. Didn't miss it this afternoon. He tried to assume a look of injured innocence.

"Well, I really don't know. Unless it dropped out during the hay battle yesterday. I was ragging about with the boys a good deal."

"Oh, you missed it yesterday, did you?"

Michael became vaguely aware of another pitfall. Always keep as near the truth as possible when you're lying—he seemed to remember as a convincing maxim.

"No. I'd no idea I'd lost it till you turned it up in that rather melodramatic way." Michael was amazed to feel a wave of apparently genuine righteous indignation surging up in him. He added, with some heat, "And I may say, if these are your usual methods of interrogation, I don't wonder the papers make a fuss about the third degree."

"Perhaps we are both being a little melodramatic, sir," said the superintendent, retreating in as good order as possible from his false position. To tell the truth, he felt considerably nonplussed, as Michael might have noticed if he had not been too occupied wondering whether the superintendent could have failed to observe the gaping and guilty chasm between his first question about the pencil and its answer. However, Armstrong began to show signs of apology rather than suspicion. Michael found himself giving a lively account of the hay battle, and in the end left the presence with a feeling of doubt as to whether its Machiavellian manoeuvres had not been a product of his own guilty imagination.

To him succeeded Griffin, evidently prepared to lose his temper on the least provocation. This was duly given to him by the superintendent's question about his unwary breakfast table remark.

"Oh, my holy heavens! If that's what you're getting at, you'd better arrest every schoolmaster in England on suspicion of murder."

The superintendent handled this highly combustible article with great delicacy. "Come, sir," he said, "you must realise that we policemen have to go into every detail, however trivial it may seem. You remember the case of Jones-Evans?"

"Jones-Evans? The Llanttyprid forward? Do I not. I always said that fellow would come to no good. Bit my——ear once in the scrum. Yes, I see what you mean."

"I take it, then, that your remarks were not meant in earnest?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. I might well have screwed the poor little blighter's neck for him. But, as it happens, I didn't, if that's what you want to know."

"Exactly. You were out in the field, weren't you, after lunch? See anything peculiar?"

"No, except Mouldy—he's the groundsman; descended from a long line of village idiots, I think. Found he'd put out one too many sets of hurdles this time."

"What did you do about it, sir?"

"Oh, I spoke a few words to him on the subject. Then we put them back in his shed again."

"About what time was that?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes before the sports began, I should say. Why?"

"Well, sir, it is possible that the body was not placed in the haystack till some time after the murder. I am naturally wondering where it might have been hidden in the interval, if this theory should be correct."

"No, there were no bodies lying about in the shed when we went in. Couldn't have been hidden, either, because Mouldy yammered something about his sacks having been moved, and shifted them all back; so we should have seen if there'd been anything behind them."

Armstrong creaked slightly in his chair. "Well, that is about all then, sir. You didn't happen to see Mrs. Vale after lunch, did you?"

"I think she came out by the garden gate once or twice, to see about the seating accommodation."

"Any one else about?"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, yes, Sims walked up and down the path for a bit. Came out as we were bringing hurdles in. And, I was forgetting. Just before that Evans walked along, from the direction of the wood. That's all."

"Then I won't trouble you any further. Can you send me Mr. Wrench?"

Armstrong beamed upon Wrench as he sat down. If he noticed the nervous tic in the master's left eyelid, and the way his hands gripped the arms of his chair, he certainly did not betray the fact.

"Now, sir, I expect you younger gentlemen know some things about the boys that the older ones don't. Perhaps you may be able to give me some suggestion as to why any one should want to kill this lad?"

"Oh, really, I've no idea. Of course he wasn't popular with the boys, though some of them played up to him because of his money; or with the staff, either, for that matter."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, he ragged any one if he thought he could get away with it; in a nasty, malicious way, too."

"I see. Though I don't imagine, from what I've seen of your colleagues, that he would get much rope from any of them."

"Good Lord, he twisted Gadsby round his finger, and as for Sims——" Wrench broke off in some confusion.

"I quite understand your hesitation, sir. Very natural under the circumstances. But, of course, even we policemen are not so stupid as to suppose that any one would commit murder from such a motive. All I'm trying to do is to get an idea of the psychology of the victim. It often gives one a line on the murderer, you know."

"Oh, well, if that's all," said Wrench, still rather uneasily, "I suppose there's no harm in telling you that Wemyss did his best to make Sims' life a hell for him."

Armstrong elicited some circumstantial evidence for this; then, feeling Wrench to be "ripe," as he put it, moved to the attack.

"All I want now, sir, is an account of your own movements between lunch and two-thirty."

Wrench visibly braced himself in his chair, and began to finger his pink tie. Armstrong noticed a slight coarsening in his accent as he began to speak.

"Aow. I was in the school—mucking about, you know."

"You must try to be more explicit, sir."

"Well, after lunch I went up to my bedroom, and lay down for a bit; feeling rather seedy. Then I felt better and thought I'd read. I remembered I'd left my book in the Common Room and went down to fetch it. Tiverton was there, and——"

"May I ask what was the book, sir?

Wrench looked up quickly, blushing. "I really don't see what—it was a French book, if you want to know, *Mademoiselle de Maupin,*" he spoke defiantly.

"I see. A school text-book. They didn't teach us French when I was at school. And then?"

"Then I read for a bit, and changed, and came down."

"You were late for the first race, weren't you sir?"

"Late? No. Who put that in your head?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Some mistake. I understood that you were not with the other masters at the beginning of the sports."

"No more I was. I was talking with a parent."

"Who was that, sir?"

"Funny thing, I don't know," said Wrench slowly. "Tall, blue-eyed chap, in a brown suit. He came up and asked me how 'Tom' was getting on. Hadn't an earthly who he was, but I told him 'Tom' was doing all right. That often happens at these beanos. Parents come up to you and expect you to know who they are and all about their boys."

"Very difficult it must be, sir. Well, that is all I need ask you. Thank you. Good-evening, sir."

Chapter V

OBVERSE AND REVERSE

Evening of the next day. They have cleared supper away in the Common Room. Tiverton, Evans and Griffin have congregated in the former's sitting-room; Wrench is on duty; Gadsby and Sims are in the village, and expected back presently. The superintendent, who has been poking and pottering about all day, is finally gone, and with his going the oppression in the air seems to have lifted a little. Other persons, too, have come and gone leaving the atmosphere still acrid and poisonous, as though after a gas attack; reporters from local and London newspapers, smelling out scandal for their titled proprietors like jackals scenting down a corpse for rather seedy lions. Reporters with notebooks; reporters with telegraph forms; reporters with cameras, rather baffled to find no "sorrowing relatives" whose contorted features they may serve up next morning as a breakfast relish for their great public; reporters courteous, insinuating, truculent, well-meaning, ignoble, acute or obtuse—the whole swarm has swept down and swept away. The night air seems to sigh with relief, and even the murder-stained hayfield may be feeling cleaner for the departure of the carrion birds who hovered over it. Millions of eyes have fastened avidly upon the news which, in its local evening paper variety, Tiverton is now declaiming to Evans and Griffin.

SHOCKING FATALITY AT PRIVATE SCHOOL
TITLED VICTIM
HAYMAKERS' SENSATIONAL 7.15 P.M. DISCOVERY
CORD ROUND SCHOOLBOY'S NECK

"Haymaker's working in a field adjoining Sudeley Hall Preparatory School late yesterday evening were horrified to find the body of a boy underneath one of the stacks. The fatal discovery was immediately communicated to the Headmaster, the Rev. P. R. Vale, M.A., who identified the body as that of his nephew, the Hon. Algernon Wyvern-Wemyss, a pupil at the school. The deceased, it transpires, had been brutally strangled, a thin cord tied round the neck being the cause of death. Superintendent Armstrong and Sergeant Pearson, of the Staverton force, were quickly on the scene and our correspondent learns that they have discovered clues which should lead to a speedy arrest. The Headmaster, who is also president of the Staverton and District Archaeological Society, in an interview stated that he suspected the crime to be the work of some vagrant and attributed the wave of violence which has lately been sweeping the country to the disastrous policy of the late Labour Government. In reply to a question, the Rev. Vale strongly deprecated the suggestion that a practical joke might have been at the back of this shocking fatality. The deceased, who was universally popular with his schoolmates, was the son of——"

"Blah! Blah! Blah!" interrupted Griffin rudely, "give it a rest."

"Oh, here's something more to your taste," went on Tiverton. "Mr. Edward Griffin, the old Oxford rugby blue, who is on the staff of Sudeley Hall, on being asked for his theory about the crime, intimated that he had nothing to say."

"I intimated that that reporter would get shot out on his face if he didn't clear off pretty quick."

"Which was impolitic of you, Edward," said Evans. "He'll have it in for you now. Don't you see, he's already contrived to make you look slightly suspect."

Griffin snatched the paper and read through the whole column. "Good Lord, I believe you're right. What with him and the bobbies, I shall be getting a hunted feeling before long."

"The superintendent got after you, did he?" Tiverton asked.

"Did he not? A nasty, suspicious blighter. Some fool must have told him what I said at breakfast in the morning."

"Not guilty," said Tiverton.

"Nor me," said Evans. "As a matter of fact, I think I'm the chief suspect at the moment. The 'clues which should lead to a speedy arrest' were my silver pencil. He found it in the haystack."

Griffin looked concerned. "I say, that's bad. I take it you are not the perpetrator of the outrage; or if you want any lying done, just tell me." He spoke lightly, but Michael became aware of a faint undercurrent of anxiety in his voice.

"That's very nice of you, Edward, but I hope it won't be necessary. Curiously enough, I am not the murderer."

"That pencil's a bit awkward, though," said Tiverton. "How did you explain it?"

"Well, I told him it must have dropped out when I was ragging about during the hay battle."

Tiverton looked as if he was about to ask another question, but refrained, saying instead, "In detective stories it would have been planted there by the criminal to throw suspicion on you."

"Perhaps it was," laughed Griffin, "as the most unpopular master at St. Botolph's, you must have plenty of enemies."

Michael reached forward to the table, took up a pile of books, and sprayed them with great deliberation over Griffin's head.

"*My* books, thank you," Tiverton said. "But look here, seriously, are you sure you lost your pencil at the hay battle? I thought I saw you using it yesterday morning. I mean, if you *did* have it yesterday, or some one found it after the hay battle and didn't give it back—well, you see, it follows that it must have been planted there, *and by some one in this place.*"

The tone of the assembly suddenly grew rather grave. Michael was feeling ashamed to be deceiving men he was fond of. But was he deceiving them? He couldn't for the life of him remember when he *had* used the pencil last. After all, it mightn't have dropped out when he was with Hero at all. But who on earth could want to——?

"I see what you mean," he said slowly. "Yes. It's an unpleasant thought, isn't it? If this person dislikes me sufficiently to want me hanged, he is presumably willing enough to bump me off himself if the law fails to come up to scratch."

Tiverton, who had been manipulating a coffee machine in a rather spinster-ish way, poured out three cups.

"I'm inclined to think, though," he said, "that you may get a reprieve. Has it struck you two what is the oddest thing about this business?"

"No."

"Proceed, Holmes, I am all attention."

"Well, where did Wemyss go after school yesterday? As far as we know he seems to have vanished off the face of the earth. And secondly, who or what could have induced him to go off in that curious manner, apparently without letting any one know or leaving any trace behind him? I believe, if we could answer the second question, the mystery would be solved."

How right Tiverton was in this conjecture they were not to realise for some time.

"You amaze me, Holmes," said Griffin, "but I must confess that I still don't see where Evans' reprieve comes in."

"Unless he was running away or playing truant—and I don't think that very likely, apart from the fact that as far as we know no one saw him in the village or on the roads—some outside agency must have induced him to leave the premises."

"A fine period," commented Griffin with admiration.

"I suggest it must have been a note of some sort from some one he knew, or he wouldn't have gone; but not from any one on the staff here, for masters do not make written assignations with boys. Wemyss would have felt there was something fishy about that."

"I sincerely trust they do not," said Griffin primly. He turned to Evans. "By jove, Michael, he's right, isn't he?" Griffin had the faculty of spontaneous enthusiasm, and Tiverton's face reflected the warmth of his approval.

Evans said, "So we look for some one outside the school who knew him?"

"Or a boy in the school. Don't forget that possibility," said Tiverton. Further exploration of the subject was interrupted by the arrival of Gadsby and Sims. Gadsby was unusually Cock and Feather-ish, and even Sims appeared, for him, quite on top of the world. Gadsby sat down and helped himself, unasked, to coffee and a cigarette. Then he delivered an ominous gargling noise and got under way.

"Just been taking old Simmie along for a quick one. He seemed a bit down in the mouth—police been chivvying him or something—so I prescribed a dose of mother's special, didn't I, Simmie?"

"That's right."

"Thought we should never get there, though. Sims saw a yellow-bottomed gorse-tit or something in the hedge, so we had to stop while he stalked it. Can't think what you see in these God-forsaken birds, Sims. Oh, and talking of birds, where's Wrench? Stalking the fair Rosa, I suppose."

"What on earth are you talking about, Gadsby?" said Tiverton, with a voice like a cold douche. Gadsby was too well lit up to be extinguished by this. He continued:

"Meantessay you haven't noticed her making eyes at meals? Dirty work at the cross-roads, you mark my words. It's a case."

Griffin and Evans shuddered ostentatiously. Sims drew himself upright in his chair; he was pink and trembling. He stuttered, "R-really, Gadsby, that's a most unneces-nerecess, er, uncalled-for remark. That sort of thing's d-disgusting—t-talking about 'bub-bub-birds'; j-just because some people—these s-stuck-up s-society people—choose to bub-behave like amilals, animals—I don't think it's f-funny at all," he concluded, in dignified confusion. Every one was rather embarrassed, except Gadsby, who opened his eyes in an exaggerated fashion and said:

"Good Lord, who'd have thought it? Sims turning pious. I say, Simmie, how many did you have when my back was turned?"

The following silence was so acute that it penetrated even Gadsby's hide, and he remarked, a bit huffily, that he supposed the subject had better be changed. This he proceeded to do, crashing his gears mercilessly.

"Well, as we seem to be in the drawing-room, I'll tell you a nice, clean joke. Oh, I say, that reminds me of a thing the superintendent said to me last evening—damn smart, I call it. Decent fullah, that."

The company was duly regaled with the superintendent's witticism, and the talk drifted in his direction. Tiverton doubted the ability of his mind, Griffin the legitimacy of his birth. Gadsby thought he was a clever fullah and a sportsman. Sims remarked with some truculence that he was not going to be bullied by any great hulking lout in a blue uniform. Michael, appealed to as the thumb-nail character-sketcher of the party, admitted that he'd been too frightened by the superintendent to get more than a blurred impression of him, but felt that his cleverness or stupidity, whichever it was, was on the grand scale, and that either would therefore be equally dangerous.

At this point the alleged philanderer, Wrench, came in. A certain awkwardness made itself felt in the atmosphere, a general looking sideways and fiddling with teaspoons and relighting of pipes.

"Have some coffee, Wrench?" said Tiverton. "Been putting the boys to bed?"

"Thanks. Yes, they're a bit worked up to-night."

Sims blurted out, "There you are, Gadsby," and grinned apologetically as four pairs of eyes shot meaning glances at him. Wrench looked about him in a puzzled way. "What *are* you talking about? Is this a bet?" The silence grew even more sultry. Tiverton broke it, like a thunderclap, "Gadsby apparently thought you were putting Rosa to bed."

"Here, I say, hang it, old man," stuttered Gadsby.

Wrench went very white. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils distended: all humanity seemed to have left his face. He rose to his feet, still holding the coffee cup, glaring at Gadsby:

"You dirty rotter!" he said, in a taut, brittle kind of voice. "You poor, brainless sot! Get to hell out of this!" His voice rose to a shout and cracked. He threw the coffee cup full in Gadsby's face.

Gadsby staggered and blinked. Blood and coffee were running down his cheek. He growled in his throat, then lurched towards Wrench and knocked him several feet into a corner, where he lay with a heap of Tiverton's golf-clubs tumbled over him, whimpering. Evans was on his feet, feeling full of blind, undirected rage. Tiverton had a queer, puzzled look on his face. Only Griffin seemed to be himself. He stood up like a cliff in front of Gadsby, took him by the shoulders, twirled him round and put him into the passage, saying quietly: "You seem to have done enough mischief for to-night; your presence will not be required any more." Then he turned round and got the sobered Sims to help him bring Wrench up to his bedroom. Tiverton and Evans were left alone in the devastated room. Tiverton still had that strange, far-away expression, as though he were trying to think out the answer to a conundrum.

"Now what on earth," he said slowly, "what on earth made me say that?"

"We all seem to be a bit bedlamite this evening," answered Michael lamely. "Well, I think I'll go along. Good-night."

And he went to bed, where he lay awake for hours, coming to realise how the dirty work of murder was only beginning when the victim was dead: going over details of the past day, and as it were piecing together thus the new, changed relationship amongst his colleagues. For there was a change: a kind of reservation beneath the surface. It came upon him with a sickening impact that he and they felt that the murderer was one of their number, and that the events of the evening had been a violent revolt of masked suspicions. He was very glad indeed that Nigel Strangeways was coming.

While the Sudeley Hall staff were showing these premonitory signs of a collapse of morale, Superintendent Armstrong and Sergeant Pearson were holding an informal council of war over whiskies and sodas in the former's house. Sergeant Pearson made his report first. He was a young, keen, open-faced officer. His curly flaxen hair and general air of blue-eyed innocence made him a favourite, especially with middle-aged women, and a success as an interviewer. His face so accurately mirrored his mind, which was entirely straightforward in its workings, that criminals were apt to open their hearts to him as to a brother, or else—hopelessly rattled by his extreme ingenuousness—suspect that it concealed a diabolic cunning and tie themselves up accordingly in knots of duplicity.

His report was long but apparently barren. He and the Sudeley constable had first verified Gadsby's alibi at the Cock and Feathers. He had arrived and left at the hours stated. He had been alone in the private room for five or six minutes after his arrival, but had then sought the more congenial atmosphere of the public bar. Pearson had then gone the rounds of all the parents living in the vicinity who had attended the sports. None of them had seen the unfortunate Wemyss. Only one recollected talking to Mr. Wrench at the sports, and that was after the 440 yards race; neither had he blue eyes nor a son called "Tom." None of them had noticed Mr. Wrench talking to a blue-eyed man in a brown suit at any time before or during the sports; though several fathers had had the requisite colour of eyes and clothing.

Meanwhile some of the sergeant's men had been combing the neighbourhood; but, if the boy had left the school grounds at all, he apparently had done it in a cap of invisibility. An extensive inquiry had also been set on foot into the whereabouts of that class described as "having no fixed abode"; the results of this were still coming in, and no support for the headmaster's theory had as yet been found. The labourers who had found the body had been put through a searching examination, the result of which was nil.

All these facts Pearson retailed in a regulation voice, sitting bolt upright and gazing dreamily at a picture of some anatomically deformed angels above the superintendent's head. He now relaxed, transferred his attention from angels to whisky, and waited for Armstrong to speak.

"Well, George," the superintendent said, "you've done a good day's work. I didn't really expect those lines to lead anywhere, but it narrows down the field to be shut of them."

He then proceeded to outline his own activities. He had first examined the rumble and front seats of Gadsby's car; there had been no sign of either having recently been occupied by a body, though that by no means eliminated Gadsby as a possible murderer. He had next interviewed the whole staff of servants at Sudeley Hall. They were now practically exempt from suspicion, having been underneath each other's noses—if not actually tumbling over each other—either in the kitchen or the garden, during the hectic period between lunch and the sports. At this point Armstrong made a pregnant pause. Knowing his superior's weakness for a dramatic effect, Pearson said, " 'Practically' you were saying, sir?"

"Yes. I stumbled over two curious pieces of evidence. The groundsman, Mould—he's a bit lacking in the upper story—but he was quite certain that a number of his sacks, full ones, had been moved since he went into his shed that morning. When he and Mr. Griffin went in, he said, he found them in a sort of lean-to position against the far wall. They were placed in such a way as to make a possible hiding-place—I got him to put them back for me as he remembered finding them after lunch."

Sergeant Pearson whistled in a way cunningly calculated to express both astonishment and admiration. The superintendent continued:

"My other exhibit is Rosa. She is one of the maids. She was in the kitchen, helping to wash up, till just before two. Then she said she felt unwell and went up to her bedroom to lie down. We have no corroboration of her movements from then till she joined some of the other servants at a dormitory window watching the sports—soon after two-thirty. Miss Rosa is a pretty hot piece of goods, I can tell you, and what's more, she's frightened. I didn't press her at all. I'm just leaving her to simmer for a bit."

Armstrong leant back, took a good swig at his glass, breathed stertorously, and beamed upon the sergeant.

"I got some interesting sidelights from the servants, too. Mr. Evans, it seems, is quite the gentleman but a bit stand-offish. Mr. Wrench is the reverse, in both particulars. Mr. Sims gives no trouble; Mr. Tiverton a good deal—'fussy old geezer,' were the words, I think. Mr. Griffin and Mr. Gadsby are 'jolly, pleasant-spoken gentlemen,' though the latter does keep whisky bottles under the bed. The Rev. Mr. Vale seems to be a holy terror, with a tongue 'like I never did'; in fact, no one would stay on for a minute if it wasn't for Mrs. Vale, who is 'a real lady and ever so nice,' though 'some do say as how she's a bit flighty and who wouldn't be with an old devil like that for a husband.' "

The superintendent filled up his glass and the sergeant's before proceeding to relate the rest of his activities. After his interview with the domestic staff he had made a thorough search of the wood; result—nil. Had tested all suitable surfaces in Mould's shed for finger-prints; result—hopeless. Had verified from several boys that Tiverton had been in and out of the Day Room after lunch. Had found a copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in Wrench's room, the illustrations of which caused him to amend his views about school text-books. Had finally left the school and paid a visit to Mr. Urquhart in Staverton.

"He told me, after the usual lawyer's demurring, that Mr. Vale, as the deceased's next-of-kin, stood to come in for a considerable sum of money; he would not like to stipulate the exact amount, etc., etc. He himself had managed the boy's financial affairs since the parents' death, Mr. Vale seeing to the educational side. Mr. Urquhart is the sole executor of the will, and only comes in for a small legacy himself, so he tells me."

Armstrong hovered again, as it were in mid-flight, and the sergeant gave the requisite cue.

"You are not satisfied with his story, sir?"

"Mark my words, young man, that fellow's frightened of something. Half the people in this case are, as far as I can make out. But I'm coming to the funny part of it. I asked him for his movements on Wednesday. He blustered a bit—all these lawyers do—then he told me a very curious story. Says he got a typewritten anonymous note by the morning post, with a Sudeley postmark, asking him to be in Edgworth Wood, that's less than a mile from Sudeley Hall, you know, at one-forty-five, when the sender would tell him something to his advantage. 'Absolute secrecy,' 'burn this note'; all the usual stuff."

"And did he?"

"Did he what? Oh, yes, he burnt it, so he says."

"I meant—did he go, sir?"

"Aha, George, you're coming on. You're wondering why a respectable solicitor should take any notice of a shady communication like that."

Pearson hadn't thought of this at all, but he nodded his head portentously. "And I suppose nobody turned up," he said.

"You suppose right, my boy, if Urquhart is to be believed. Now if the thing was a genuine hoax he would probably not have destroyed the note. On the other hand, if he really did meet some one, he would be eager to produce that some one to prove an alibi. Anyway, I've left him to simmer, too. We're going to see him again to-morrow, though he doesn't know it. I've put a tag on him, of course, and I've sent Wills and Johnson to inquire whether any one saw him or his car anywhere about Edgworth. It's a deserted sort of place, though."

"You mean, you think it's possible that he——?"

"He might have done it; yes. But I doubt it. He doesn't stand to gain much by the boy's death. No, I've other ideas about Mr. Urquhart. Lives very well for a solicitor, don't he?" the superintendent added irrelevantly. "Big car, posh house and all. Well, well, we shall see. Now, George, what is your theory about this crime?"

This was another favourite gambit of the superintendent's, and Pearson made the conventional movement in reply. He scratched his head, stared dismally into his whisky and soda, and mumbled something about not seeing the wood for the trees yet. Armstrong took so deep a breath that his buttons threatened to fly off and expelled it to the visible perturbation of his moustache; his decks thus cleared for action.

"All right, then," he said, "let's take a look at the trees. Assuming for the present that Wemyss was murdered where the body was found, some time between one and four p.m. Can we narrow the time down?"

"Well, sir, no one but a loony would have killed him during the sports. Hayfield's in full view of most of the sports ground and that particular haystack is only about thirty yards from where some of the spectators were standing."

"Twenty-six and a half, actually," said Armstrong with elaborate negligence. "Yes, you're right there. We can take two-thirty as one limit. Probably two-twenty; because people were coming out on to the field by then. Now, Mrs. Vale says she was in that haystack till about one-twenty-five, and she wouldn't be likely to admit it if it wasn't true. What do you think of her, George?"

George grinned sheepishly. "She's a bit of all right, she is."

"Aha! Fallen for a skirt again. You'll never make a detective, young man," rallied the superintendent ponderously. "Now, if you ask me, I'd say she was a deep one. Got nerve, too. Wonder if she's got enough nerve to take her lunch beside a corpse."

"Good Lord, sir, you can't mean that?" The sergeant was genuinely shocked.

"I should say she'd strength enough to strangle a young whipper-snapper like that. And there's the money, don't forget that."

"Well, if you're thinking of that motive, what about old Brimstone?" said Pearson disrespectfully.

"Mm. Took half an hour to change, he says. Had plenty of time to slip down before his wife came up. Mr. Urquhart told me the school was prosperous, though, and I can't see Brimstone taking a risk like that unless he was on his beam-ends—if then."

"Surely that applies equally to Mrs. Brim—Vale, doesn't it?" said the chivalrous Pearson.

"From that point of view, perhaps, though we don't know that she may have run into debt privately. Dresses pretty expensively. But you're forgetting what the servants said."

The sergeant stared uncomprehendingly.

" 'Flighty' was the word. I couldn't get 'em to say any more. But that's another possible motive. Supposing she'd been carrying on with some one, and Wemyss caught 'em at it, she and some one would want to stop his tongue for him, I fancy."

"B-but she's a lady, sir," was all the sergeant could find to say.

Armstrong smiled good-humouredly. "And ladies never do anything worse than leave their cars unattended outside shops. Well, let's get on to the other trees. Take opportunity only. Tiverton? Out of the question. Gadsby? Might have croaked the lad before, after or between drinks and hid the body in the rumble seat. But when did he plant it in the hayfield? Must have been after the sports. I'll have to find out where they all were between four-thirty and seven; should have done it before. Then there's Sims; out in the field after two-fifteen; but Griffin and Mould were outside too—far too dangerous. Griffin? Mould is *his* alibi and a pretty strong one. Evans? In the wood all the time, he says, till two-fifteen. A nice, quiet place for a bit of strangling, though I didn't find any marks of a struggle. But when could he plant the body?"

"Mr. Griffin smoked a cigarette after lunch, so no one would be outside till about one-forty," suggested Pearson.

"Good for you, me lad, I'd forgotten that. Though it'd be a pretty risky business carrying a body from the wood to the hayfield. There aren't many windows looking that way, but he couldn't be certain no one would come out. Still, there's that pencil. . . . You know, it'd have been much easier if he'd been in the haystack with Mrs. Vale."

The sergeant looked pained again. Armstrong grinned at him. "Well, if you won't have that, what about Wrench? Another of the frightened brigade. Poor alibi. Says he was in his bedroom most of the time. Seemed a bit disconcerted when I asked him what book he'd been reading. Could have done it between lunch and one-forty, when Griffin went out—though there again, he couldn't be sure no one wouldn't come out. Then there's Mould. He's a bit simple—that type's often homicidal—and the sort of person Wemyss might have ragged the head off, but he was having lunch in the kitchen till he went out to meet Griffin. Last of all, Rosa. Poor alibi from two to two-thirty, but the same objection to her as to Sims. There remains the mysterious individual with blue eyes and a brown suit. Nobody saw him till the opening of the sports—and I doubt if any one saw him then."

"You mean, Wrench is making it up?"

"I'm sure he is, and I should very much like to know why. It's about the feeblest effort at a faked alibi I've ever heard. Well now. In point of opportunity, Mrs. Vale or Evans—or both of them together—win in a canter. Don't look at me in that nasty way, young feller, you've got to keep your susceptibilities out of this. Next come Mr. Vale, Gadsby and Wrench in a bunch, and Wrench is the dark horse of that lot. Tiverton, Griffin, Sims, Mould and Rosa are left at the start."

"And for motive, sir?" There was a mixture of respect and apprehension in the sergeant's voice.

"Three possibilities so far. Money, revenge, and silence. Vale or Mrs. Vale might have been actuated by the first; Sims or Mould by the second; Mrs. Vale and the unknown some one by the third," said the superintendent succinctly.

Pearson shifted uneasily, "It certainly don't look too good for Mrs. Vale."

"Revenge seems to me least likely. Grown men don't kill boys just because they've had their tails twisted by them. Money? Well, as I say, the Rev. Vale seems to have enough of it; his wife is more open to suspicion on that count. But I put my money on the third. If the boy knew of some intrigue going on, he was just the sort who'd be likely to blab about it. Mrs. Vale is one obvious party, though I'm not forgetting Rosa. As for the other party, the some one——" Armstrong paused significantly.

"Evans?"

"You've said it. Young, good-looking; just the opposite of that old fossil of a headmaster. *And* his pencil was in the haystack. *And* he and Mrs. Vale both took their lunch out; curious coincidence, that. I'm going to keep a pretty sharp eye on those two birds."

The sergeant emptied his glass and stared at the bottom of it, presumably for inspiration. Finally he said, "I don't quite understand, sir, why you haven't considered the possibility of it having been done by one of the boys."

"Don't you worry about that. I'm not forgetting the possibility. Of course, if it had been, it could only have been a rag that went too far. Boys don't murder each other—besides, I forgot to tell you. I had a little chat with several of the head boys; prefects, they call them. Any one leaving the room had to ask their permission. No one did. But even supposing some one had got out unnoticed. Supposing they had set on this young Wemyss. They might have pretended to throttle him, *or* to garrotte him with the cord, but the medical evidence suggests that he was first strangled with hands and then the cord tied round to make certain. Nobody would do that as a joke. It's deliberate murder. And I don't believe any boy could make those bruises, either."

The sergeant felt that this reasoning, though specious, had been rather flimsily constructed by Armstrong as a defence against a possibility which he had not explored with his usual thoroughness. Pearson loyally repressed an inclination to wonder whether his superior was not marshalling the facts to fit his own theory, though indeed the case against Mrs. Vale and perhaps Evans did look far stronger than any other. After rather a long silence he said tactfully:

"Well, sir, I presume the chief constable is not going to call in the Yard at present. After your work in the Crawleigh murder last year, I don't suppose he thinks we shall need their help."

"No, he is leaving it to me for the present," replied the superintendent, not without gratification, "but a fellow called Strangeways is coming down; he's a nephew of the Assistant Commissioner. Private inquiry agent he calls himself, an amateur, but he's done several pretty enough pieces of work. Evans wired for him this morning. He's a friend of his, apparently, so I suppose he'll be doing his best to put a spoke in our wheel. Still, he'll be living in the school and he may be able to find out what I want to know more than anything else."

"And what's that, sir?"

"How the murderer got Wemyss into position for the murder."

Chapter VI

TWO BALLOONS GO UP

Once again Sweeny, the factotum, is ringing his bell. He mutters to himself the while, but whatever he may be saying is drowned by the harsh peremptory tongue which tells the school that another day has begun. The shadow of death still lies upon the school, but it is chequered now, a kind of half-mourning, here lying heavy as original darkness, here shot through by the returning rays of a normal sun. In the dormitories, where boys are scurrying to and fro, thinking of a lesson unprepared, a cricket match, holidays to come, the shadow lies lightest. Here the elastic mind of youth has thrown off whatever weight tragedy may have laid upon it and bounds forward irrepressibly on its natural course, though even here there may remain one or two dark patches not yet dissipated by the sun. In their cramped, monastic bedrooms the masters are dressing. Though morning smiles happily outside their windows, night still holds the upper hand within. Is it from one of these rooms that blackness emanates to infect all the rest? Is it here—the core and centre of evil—hidden away from sight like an ancestral monster? And is that monster dormant again now, satisfied with one disaster, relapsed again into a period of sleep? Or is it waiting, the Adversary, ambushed behind a smile, an old acquaintance, an ordinary face?

Thus pondered Michael, deliberately trying to multiply his apprehensions to their highest power, skating fancy figures over the thin ice which he already could hear cracking beneath his feet. That pencil. How much did the superintendent really know? Was it possible that no one had seen Hero and himself in the haystack? How innocent and safe it had all seemed then. There had only been two people in their world, but now the world was closing in on them, as on growing children, and the end of innocence in sight. "The wages of sin is death"—the final, remorseless phrase marched into his mind. He shook his head impatiently. Surely one had got rid of that out-dated superstition. But no, it seemed to have taken on a new lease of life. He remembered the half-laughing words Nigel had once spoken, "We're not meant to be happy. You may think you've got away with it at last, but that's just when They come back at you." Well, at least he'd keep Hero out of this. The fact of their love remained, and if some sacrifice must be offered in return for it, to appease the jealous gods, let them take him. Let them take him and break his neck on the end of a string. God, he thought, I'm talking as if I had done it myself; talking melodrama like any wretched egoist of a murderer writing his last confessions. I'm not guilty. They don't hang innocent people. Oh, don't they just? Anyway, Nigel will find out the truth. . . .

The Rev. and Mrs. Vale are having breakfast. Well, I asked for it, Hero is thinking; I asked for a crashing great emergency to turn up and cut the tangle, and it has. At least, it's turned up, but it only seems to have made the tangle worse so far. I can't leave Percy now, just when he feels everything is breaking up for him. It's not honour and dutifulness. One can fight pompous abstracts, but not this imperative woman deep inside oneself. Oh, Michael, your hands, your exquisite touch. I wonder what Michael did say to that policeman. "Yes, Percy, Mr. Strangeways?" she said: she had the successful wife's faculty of keeping her ears for her husband and her thoughts to herself.

"This Mr. Strangeways is, I understand, able and well-connected. Evans suggested that he should wire for him, as you know, in order that we might have some one to—a-ah—watch the case in the interests of the school. I have just heard that he will be arriving at Staverton by the twelve-forty. Evans has the last period off and intended to meet his friend at the station. Perhaps you might care to go in with him and drive Mr. Strangeways back."

"That's a good idea. We might all have lunch there. I've some shopping to do." Even Percival Vale might, at any other time, have noticed the over-studied negligence in her voice. But he had other things to think of.

"I am not at all sorry he is coming, my dear," he confided, "I am by no means happy at the course the investigation is taking."

"Why, Percy? Has the superintendent been bothering you about the will?"

"No. He has not, in fact, touched upon it at all. I really can't understand it. But I strongly resent members of my staff being held in suspicion."

Hero's hands suddenly clasped themselves tight under the table. She spoke sharply, "Whatever do you mean?"

"Perfectly ridiculous on the part of the superintendent. He found Mr. Evans' pencil in the haystack where poor Algernon was murdered. He'd dropped it there, of course, during the hay fight. But Tiverton has told me, in confidence, that the police seem to be attaching importance to it. Quite erroneously, of course. A member of my staff connected with an occurrence like this! Fantastic."

The headmaster was quite heated at the idea. But his wife's heart dropped below zero. God, it's come. What fools we were, tempting providence like that. One can't tell how brave one is till the emergency comes, I said. Well, here it is. Go on, be brave! Think hard! What are you going to do now? Thank heavens I shall be able to talk with Michael before that foul policeman turns up again. Michael will know what to do. That's it. Put it all on to him! Get into a panic again like a blasted schoolgirl!

But it was not given to Hero to discuss the new development with Michael until discussion had become useless. At ten o'clock Armstrong arrived at the school and asked for a few words with Mr. Evans. Michael went into the morning-room. The superintendent received him amiably enough, but he was not an unknown quantity now; Michael felt the force of authority behind him and a certain indefinable menace. Armstrong began seriously:

"Now, Mr. Evans, I have come to ask you one or two questions which I am afraid may be distasteful to you. But I am sure you realise that in a case of this grave nature the interests of justice must overweigh all private considerations."

Michael relaxed slightly. This didn't sound like an address to a suspected murderer.

"Certainly," he said.

"When you were in the wood, Mr. Evans, you said you were looking out in the direction of the hayfield some of the time?"

"Yes—I think I did—once or twice."

"Did you happen to notice Mrs. Vale there?"

This is getting difficult. Tell the truth when in doubt. "No—she was in the haystack, wasn't she. One can't see over the top from the wood."

"I see. And you would be prepared to state on oath that to your knowledge no one else came out on to the hayfield while you were in the wood?"

"Yes, but it doesn't seem to help much. As I say, I hadn't the field under view for more than a few minutes altogether."

Armstrong rubbed his chin and his brow contracted. He said, with apparent hesitation, "It's a pity. If only you'd been looking in that direction most of the time—well, as it is, it only helps to strengthen a theory which I was most reluctant to form." He paused in an indecisive way.

"What on earth are you getting at?" said Michael, a premonition of what was to come sharpening his voice.

"Look here, sir. I have come to a tentative conclusion, and I'm going to take the risk of telling you what's in my mind; I shouldn't be sorry, as I say, if somebody could prove it wrong. Even we policemen don't much fancy accusing a——you realise, sir, that everything I am going to say is in strict confidence?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, then, the most tenable explanation of the crime so far is that it was committed during lunch by Mrs. Vale, with or without the connivance of her husband." The superintendent blurted out this last speech, as though trying to conquer his own doubts as to its truth. His eyes looked at Michael with a rather apologetic expression, but they looked at him very hard. Michael sprang to his feet in a swirl of emotions—shock, indignation, fear and a certain utterly base relief.

"Stop! You must be mad," he was almost shouting. "I won't listen to this! It's absolutely wicked. It's sheer lunacy to imagine that——" Armstrong gestured with his hands and interrupted.

"Please sit down, sir, and hear me out. I'm afraid I put it too abruptly. It is only fair that you should know the facts that have compelled me to take up this position."

He mentioned the will in the Vales' favour and asserted that he could find no other possible motive for the crime. He suggested that it would be far easier for the headmaster or his wife than for any one else to ask the boy to come to the haystack, or wherever he was murdered, without arousing his curiosity. A picnic might have been proposed, for instance, immediately after school. "What's more," he added, "the movements of every one else about the school are accounted for satisfactorily with the exception—to be frank—of your own. And in your own case there is obviously no motive; to mention only one difficulty."

Had Michael's brain been capable of its usual activity, he could not have failed to see the gaping holes in Armstrong's jerry-built case. But the unexpected grouping of events into such a different and staggering pattern had taken his wits away, and he could only think what his own attitude should be to the new situation. Armstrong was relying on this, and without giving Michael time to dispose his forces, went on, looking keenly at him the while:

"I am not, of course, asserting that this theory is correct; but it is the only one which fits the facts at present in our possession. The difficulty from your point of view—believing quite naturally that Mrs. Vale is innocent—is that she was alone in the hayfield during a part of the critical period. That's why I asked you if you'd seen any one else there. Any evidence that tended to prove that Wemyss was not in the haystack with Mrs. Vale would naturally decrease the suspicion against her, or remove it altogether. As it is——"

The superintendent shrugged his shoulders with an admirable simulation of regret and seemed about to end the interview. Michael's brain was running round in demented circles. Should he confess to the murder? Or was that unnecessarily quixotic? No, he'd never be able to make the details fit the facts convincingly at such short notice. If he said he'd been with Hero, that would almost certainly mean exposure and disgrace for both of them, but at least it would clear her of the more terrible suspicion. Yes, he must take the risk. The superintendent's hand was already on the door handle; his broad back prevented Michael from seeing that the knuckles were white and tense.

"Just a moment, superintendent."

Armstrong turned slowly, a faintly surprised expression on his face. One could not possibly have guessed that he was seeing a weak card bluff the trick.

"Sir?"

Michael was trembling uncontrollably. Even his voice seemed out of control. "You have told me something in confidence, and I'm going to make the same request of you. If what I am going to say turns out to have no bearing on the case, will you promise to keep it to yourself?"

"Well, sir, that's rather a difficult thing to promise. But I can assure you that if we solve this problem, we shall not bring forward any evidence without it is necessary to incriminate the murderer."

"Very well. I was with Mrs. Vale in the haystack from one to one-twenty-five." The words tumbled out, as though eager to rescue Hero. The superintendent gaped for a moment, then pulled himself together and said:

"You realise this is a very serious business, sir? You have been obstructing the police in the course of their duty—you and Mrs. Vale—by the false statements you originally made."

"Yes, I know, I know. But you must see that we couldn't let it become known. The scandal——"

The superintendent shaded his face with his hand "I see, sir: that certainly seems to let Mrs. Vale out, though it is not too easy to credit your second story when your first is admittedly a tissue of lies." He paused.

"You must believe me," said Michael frantically. "You said that if any one had been with Mrs. Vale it would remove the suspicion against her." He commanded his voice and spoke soberly, "I swear to you that Mrs. Vale and I were together and that we saw nothing of her nephew."

Yes, you were together all right, thought Armstrong, but I think you saw more of her nephew than was good for him.

"And, if you need any further explanation," continued Michael, "we were there because we love each other."

"So I gathered," said Armstrong dryly. Then he smiled in a more friendly way, and added, "Well, sir, you've led us a pretty dance, but I'm inclined to believe that you're telling the truth now. I shall not let this go further unless it becomes absolutely necessary. And I'm asking you to keep our conversation—all of it—entirely to yourself; that is, with the exception of Mrs. Vale."

"But—Strangeways——"

"Oh, yes, I was forgetting him. Yes," the superintendent seemed oddly disconcerted, "I think you'd better let me tell him as much as I think necessary first. Then you can, if you wish, communicate to him more fully the position between yourself and Mrs. Vale. Now there are just two more questions. What did you do when you left Mrs. Vale?"

"I went into the wood, and stayed there, as I told you, till two-fifteen."

"And secondly, what were your movements between the end of the sports and the roll-call?"

"I was in the Common Room. We were all there for tea, as a matter of fact."

"And then?"

"Well, I stayed there reading till seven o'clock. Tiverton was on duty, so he was in and out all the time. And Griffin went out after tea to see if Mould tidied up the ground properly. The rest of us remained in the Common Room."

"Till seven? You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely."

Armstrong declared himself satisfied and rose. Michael went back to his class-room feeling a vast relief. The balloon had gone up certainly, but that was almost bound to happen. It might be kept dark for a bit even now, and Hero was safe; that was all that really mattered. That superintendent was not such a bad stick at all. Michael would have had cause to reverse his opinion if he could have heard what Armstrong was saying to himself, as he went to have his few words with Hero. "The motive! And out of his own mouth!" he exulted, clenching his right fist hard in his pocket. That the superintendent was a brilliant, if unscrupulous, tactician, is sufficiently obvious by now. But he lacked the comprehensive view of the strategist, or he might have asked himself why a man who had committed murder to keep the secret of his guilty love should so easily be induced to betray his motive.

Oblivious of the suspicions they were leaving behind them, Michael and Hero drove towards Staverton. It was the first occasion they had been alone together for any time since their mad half-hour in the haystack. Michael's hand was on her knee. They felt much older since then; happy, but exhausted, as though the shore lights were in sight after a stormy passage. Hero's driving was an index of her character; cool and efficient up to a point, but she was apt to grow impatient with the process, and then it became a headlong one. In an emergency she sometimes lost her head for a fraction of a second. The luck of the careless carried her through this blind moment, and after it she got her grip again very quickly and was cool and efficient till the next one. She turned the car up a lane out of the main road and drove bumping through a gate. Here, where they were hidden by the hedge, she took Michael's hand and leant back on his shoulder.

"Darling, I'm glad it's all out. I am, really. But what made you change your plan and tell the superintendent?"

"My hand was forced. You see, he thought—" even now Michael could scarcely get the words out—"he thought you might have done it yourself."

"Me? Are you sure? Why, I was told that it was you he suspected. My dear, it was terrible. Percy said this morning that they had found your pencil in the haystack, and I thought of them putting you in prison and tying a rope round your neck." Hero's body shook and she began to cry.

"Hero, my beautiful, please don't cry. I shall start in a minute. It makes me feel as if my inside had all collapsed."

She laughed tremulously and wiped her eyes on his sleeve, "You know, I'm much softer than I thought I was." Then she told him what the superintendent had said to her: Mr. Evans had altered his evidence and would she corroborate his new story. "So of course I did. Michael, it's a shaming thing to have to tell you, but I must. I thought at first you'd done it because you'd lost your nerve. Please forgive me."

Michael forgave her with many kisses, "Well, I suppose I did," he said, "it broke me up altogether when he said that he believed you'd done the deed. I could have killed him."

"I wish you would, Michael. I don't like him at all; his horrid pig's eyes and his smarmy manners: I believe he's capable of anything—he's probably ordering ropes for both of us now," she added, laughing.

"Oh, I don't think he's as bad as all that. After all, he might have made a nasty fuss about the lies we told him. And he did give me every chance to prove his theory wrong."

"Well, I wouldn't trust him an inch. You know, Michael," she went on irrelevantly, "I feel as if I'd just been reprieved and let out of prison. The grass is extra green and the sky extra blue and the birds singing specially for us. I feel good. I think we ought to be good. I think we ought to tell Percy."

"Get in our word before it all comes out in the general washing of dirty linen. Your psychological motives are highly questionable."

Hero flushed and stiffened a little. "You have rather a mean mind sometimes. I hate this talk about psychological motives. What's the point in rooting out all the bad reasons that one does a good thing for?"

"I didn't say 'bad reasons.' "

"Oh, don't be silly. You know that whenever you say 'psychological motives' you mean to imply the worst. Presumably there are psychological motives behind our loving each other, but you don't talk about them. No doubt you'll start to when you get tired of it."

"Hero, don't turn away from me like that. We mustn't start quarrelling now. It's this damned murder business which is upsetting me. You can't imagine what it's like in the Common Room. Every one seems on the point of flying at every one else's throat. Gadsby and Wrench have had a dust-up already, and Tiverton simply snaps every one's head off. Griffin seems the only one of us left who is not qualifying for the loony-bin. But I think you're right. We ought to tell Percy."

"I'm so glad. My sweet, you know I didn't mean it—about your having a mean mind. Let's wait a few days, though, till he's got over this shock."

"Is he taking it badly?"

"Oh, just what you'd expect. The school will be ruined, and so on. He's forgotten all about Algernon, I think. But one oughtn't to talk about him like that. Poor dear, the school is the only thing he can see."

"*L'école, c'est moi.* Well, let's hope that Nigel finds the murderer outside it."

"Tell me about Nigel. We'd better start off again. You can tell me on the way."

"Nigel? Oh, he's a very good stick indeed. Up at Oxford with me—for goodness' sake keep your eye on the road and not me; you nearly ditched us then——"

"You look so nice, I can't take my eyes off you."

"Up at Oxford with me, I repeat. Could not stick two years of the place, the spectacle of so many quite decent youths being got at and ruined for life was too much for him. Heard that at Cambridge the hearties were still heartier and the intelligentsia even less intelligent, so decided to dispense with any further education. So he answered all his examinations in limericks—very good answers, I believe—he's a first-rate brain, but it alienated the dons, they have no taste for modern poetry, and he got sent down. Travelled about for a bit, learning languages. Then settled down to investigate crime; said it was the only career left which offered scope to good manners and scientific curiosity. He's been very successful; made pots of money. He did all the stuff in the Duchess of Esk's diamonds affair and several high-hat blackmail cases which have figured less prominently in the press."

"But what's he like?"

"Like? Oh, like one of the less successful busts of T. E. Shaw. A nordic type. He's rather faddy, by the way; his protective mechanism developed them, I daresay. But you must have water perpetually on the boil; he drinks tea at all hours of the day. And he can't sleep unless he has an enormous weight on his bed. If you don't give him enough blankets for three, you'll find that he has torn the carpets up or the curtains down."

"Sounds crazy to me."

"Oh, you'll like him all right. He's a simple soul, really. . . ."

The figure that emerged from a first-class carriage and advanced towards them with rather ostrich-like strides did not, Hero thought, live up to Michael's lurid description. Nigel Strangeways blinked at her short-sightedly and bowed her over hand with a courtliness a little spoilt by the angularity of his movement. He made one or two flat remarks, which his loud and exuberant voice somehow redeemed from banality, then they moved down the platform and got into the car. Hero hoped to improve the acquaintance over lunch, but, as it happened, lunch had to be postponed. Her husband had given her a note to take to James Urquhart. She stopped behind the solicitor's Daimler, which was standing outside his house. But as she was on the point of ringing, the door opened suddenly and a small, pouchy-faced man emerged, carrying a suitcase. "Why, James——" said Hero, but the man leapt down the steps, collided with a nondescript-looking individual who suddenly rose up in his path, sent him staggering away into the road, and flung himself and his suitcase into the front of the Daimler. Heavy footsteps could be heard thundering down the stairs, but by the time the superintendent and the sergeant were out of the house, Urquhart had started his car, thrust off the nondescript man who had picked himself up and was trying to get his hands on the steering wheel, and was twenty yards down the street. Armstrong glanced at Hero and Michael, hesitated a second, then rapped out a few orders to his sergeant and jumped into Hero's car. Michael had moved into the driving seat, anticipating action.

"Follow that car," shouted the superintendent, "he can't get away for long, but the sooner we catch him, the better."

Hero bundled into the back seat, where Strangeways took her arm in the most friendly and reassuring way, remarking, "I seem to have plunged *in medias res,* as you might say." Michael jumped the car forward in second, skidded neatly between a bus and a sandwich man at the corner, and hurled them in a series of swoops and jerks through the traffic of the High Street. "O death," sang Strangeways, in a raucous baritone, "how bitter art thou to him that liveth in peace, to him that hath joy in his possessions and liveth free from trouble." The broad back of the Daimler slipped coyly round a corner, fifty yards ahead, its red rear lamp winking an offensive challenge. Michael changed down at forty, the car swayed and seemed to hang like a lift at the bottom of its descent, then he accelerated into the side street and was confronted by a level crossing, with the gates just beginning to close. Michael in control of a fast car was a person in whom one would scarcely recognise the decorous, slightly neurotic schoolmaster of Sudeley Hall. He put his car at the gates like a seasoned huntsman. Nigel murmured to Hero:

"Does your vehicle jump?" Then gently closed his eyes as they rocked over the metals with the gates scraping and jarring at their rear wings. The superintendent shot an apprehensive glance at Michael, but he was staring ahead, smiling serenely, apparently not contemplating further addition to his tale of victims.

They were out in the country now, drumming in third up a long incline. Trees pounced at them and withdrew, hedges moved endlessly past like conveyor belts, the tyres purred on a different road surface, and the Daimler kept its distance. They bucketed over the top and a steep hill fell away at their feet. Michael went down it like an aeroplane diving. The speedometer needle surged up from fifty to sixty, to seventy, to seventy-five. Armstrong, putting his head outside, found his eyelids fluttered up and down by the wind's pressure. The Daimler looked bigger now, and they could see the figure inside bumping up and down hunched over the wheel. Strangeways held Hero closer, remarked that this was better than the movies and began singing an aria from "Israel in Egypt." Hero's golden hair was floating above her head as though she were sitting over an electric fan, her eyes were sparkling and her mouth curved ecstatically. Even the superintendent forgot his fright in the general excitement, and to the astonishment of the company began to deliver hunting cries in a high tenor.

A red triangle flicked past; a blind cross-roads ahead. The Daimler was over them. A baby Austin nosed out from behind a barn on the right; the owner gave a startled glance at the projectile leaping at him down the hill, flurried with his hands, and stopped almost in the middle of the cross-roads. Michael's left hand dropped on the brake and his right forced the wheel steadily over to the right. They swung behind the tail of the Austin, then Michael jerked the wheel to the left and braked hard. The tyres screamed, a wall sprang at the right side of the car, seemed to halt in mid-spring as Michael put the wheel right over again, was snatched away. They were through.

"Michael *darling!*" said Hero.

"God's truth!" said Nigel.

"Well done, sir," said the superintendent, opening his eyes again, then pointed ahead. The Daimler was lurching from side to side of the road like a maddened bull. Urquhart must have fatally glanced back, expecting his pursuers to be smashed at the cross-roads. A tyre burst. The Daimler went off at a tangent into the ditch. Her huge body pirouetted on its front wheels, was tossed up into the air like a toy, twirled over the hedge, and fell devastatingly into the field beyond, jerking clear a small black figure, a suitcase and several cushions, which came to earth scattered and severally, as though vomited out of a volcano. They all listened, expecting to hear the dreadful thump of the body, though even the Daimler's crash had been scarcely audible through the roar of their own engine. When the body dropped out of sight behind the hedge, they winced and felt as if they were going to be hit hard in the wind. Michael pulled up and scrambled with the superintendent into the field. The Daimler looked like a scrap-heap. Urquhart, too, was in a sorry mess, but a bush had broken his fall and he was not dead. They got him quickly into the nearest village, where a doctor attended him till the ambulance came from Staverton.

Armstrong proposed to remain by Urquhart's bedside in the hospital till he recovered consciousness; if he ever should. But he thanked Michael, a little awkwardly, for his help and promised to come up to the school that evening if he could, and tell them all about it.

"Is he—James—the man, the one you're looking for?" said Hero, as Armstrong was preparing to depart.

"Well, no, he's not the murderer, ma'am. At least, I should be very surprised if—but if he ever gets over this, he'll see the inside of a prison all right, I can promise you that."

With this they had to rest contented for seven hours or so. After dinner that night, when the headmaster and his wife, Michael and Nigel were discussing the affair in the drawing-room, the superintendent was announced. He walked gravely up to Percival Vale, "I'm afraid this will be a terrible shock to you, sir. Mr. Urquhart is dead. Before he died he made a confession. One which, I may say, confirmed my own theory about him. He had been playing fast and loose with your nephew's fortune. He had appropriated a considerable part of it from time to time for his own uses, then speculated, unsuccessfully, in an attempt to make good the estate. I think he knew that I suspected this, for when I went to interview him this morning he sent in a message that he would see me in five minutes, and he spent those five minutes in collecting whatever remained and was accessible of Master Wemyss' property. I had posted a plain-clothes man at the door, but he got past him. For the rest we have to thank Mrs. Vale for her car and Mr. Evans for his fine driving."

The headmaster sank into a chair, his face was buried in his trembling hands, and Armstrong could only guess what emotions were being concealed. He went on:

"And, of course, that means that the murderer is still at large. Mr. Urquhart would be the last person to kill the boy, since his death would inevitably lead to his own immediate exposure. I take it that you had no suspicion of what was going on, Mr. Vale?"

The headmaster raised the face of one who saw the last props of a shaken world give way, "It can be scarcely necessary for me to say that I had no idea of it," he answered hopelessly.

"I have a reason for asking the question, sir," said Armstrong, and proceeded to relate the incident of the anonymous note which had brought the solicitor to Edgworth Wood. "You see," he explained, "I couldn't imagine what would induce Mr. Urquhart to keep such an unprofessional appointment, unless he himself had something on his conscience and the note referred to it. Now that we know he *had* something on his conscience, we can infer that the writer of the note must have known of it or guessed it——"

"It might have been a shot in the dark," interrupted Strangeways.

"That is barely possible, of course. Do you know of any one who would be likely to have discovered Mr. Urquhart's frauds, sir? Any one, that is, who also had personal connection with your nephew?"

"No."

"That is a pity, sir, because there doesn't seem much doubt that a person who fulfils those two qualifications wrote the note, and the person who wrote the note was the murderer."

Chapter VII

ABOUT IT AND ABOUT

The next day Strangeways spent in getting the feel of the place, as he put it. He had a great advantage over the superintendent here; not only was he understood to be "on our side," for so the Common Room looked upon it, but he had an uncanny knack for fitting into the different kinds of circles and societies into which his profession brought him. He did this, not as most "mixers" do, by altering himself to suit the environment, or by any apparent exercise of social tact. It was his obvious and genuine interest in the person he was talking to—a far more sincere form of flattery than imitation—that was his passport to so many differing types of individual. This interest was actually far less flattering to the individual than it seemed on the surface, for it proceeded from scientific and not sentimental curiosity, but its ultimately impersonal nature was concealed by Strangeways' personal vitality and good manners, and very few of those who were subjects of it realised that they were dealing with a kind of human microscope.

Let us follow him as he steers an erratic, seemingly aimless course through a school day. He has had breakfast with the staff. Work has begun. He moves slowly down the corridor between class-rooms, as Michael did three days before. First on the left, the headmaster taking Latin. The real, genuine old pedagogue's voice, matured in the wood, snapping and buzzing away like electric sparks in a tense, strained silence. That man, thinks Nigel, has not passion enough for one kind of murder, and surely his mind is too complacent and academic for the other. The school is the symbol and vindication of his own ego. His reaction to the crime, Hero and Michael agree, is a feeling that his life-work had been badly damaged; a kind of blow, not simply at his reputation, but at himself. That feeling is real, not assumed; I can see that for myself. It is unthinkable that such a man, in order to get hold of a property which he does not need, would commit a murder bound to damage the school and therefore to violate his own ego.

He moved on. Gadsby. A common enough type. Good-looking once, the life and soul of the party, a great success in a small, mentally confined circle. And then he grows older, loses his looks and youthful zest, the circle is broken up and he is left defenceless. There remains drink; "love affairs"; some kind of drug to make him forget his losses. He is almost burnt out, a bonhomous automaton. Almost burnt out, but perhaps not quite. The sort of person who might be found mixed up in one of these squalid "Crimes passionnels." The sort to commit murder from fright, not for revenge. Wonder how he supports this monastic life. He doesn't talk to the boys like a homosexual, repressed or otherwise. I must have a look at the servants, that was a handsome wench waiting at breakfast.

A devilish hubbub broke into his thoughts. He moved over to the door on his right whence it proceeded, murmuring, *"Mon dieu, quel hulerberlu! Quel,* I might even say, *tohu-bohu!"* Feet were clattering on desks, books falling, or, more likely, being thrown, hoots, groans and scuffles. A jerky, ineffectual voice said, "Stop this noise, won't you! You two, sit down at once. What's all this disturbance about?"

"Please, sir, Pompo's lizard has escaped. Wooh! Look out, sir, it's going up your trouser leg."

"Lizard? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Don't you know what a lizard is, sir? A reptilian quadruped, common in tropical regions, with a long tail, and knobs on."

"Ponsonby, none of your insolence or I'll report you to Mr. Vale. Now then, Bastin, what's all this about your filthy lizard?"

"Sir, he's not filthy, sir, his name is Gloucestershire, because he's got a long tail, you see, sir."

"Chew yourself, Pomps. We beat your mouldy old Middlesex anyway."

The anguished voice of Sims blurted out again. It was just like a sheep strayed on the mountains, Nigel thought, "The next boy who talks without permission will be kept in this afternoon. Now then, what do you mean by bringing a lizard into form?" Dead silence. "Will you answer me at once."

"Please, sir, you didn't give me permission to speak."

Sims laughed, an uncertain, would-be ingratiating laugh, "The point is well taken. You may speak."

"Well, sir, he was so lonely by himself in my desk—oh corks! Look out, you chaps, he's trying to get under the door!" There was a trebly increased rumpus, several bodies crashed against the door, then an angry wail arose, "Curse you, Stevens II., you've pulled its tail off! I'll give you such a conk on the nut." "I'm frightfully sorry, Pompo. It just cime awiy in me 'and: oh, you would, would you?" Crash, bang, thump, screech.

Strangeways moved off at a brisk walk, as he heard the headmaster's door opening, and stopped again at a discreeter distance. Mr. Vale entered the inferno. Medusa herself could not have had a more petrifying effect, "The whole of this form will stay in this afternoon and write out lines for me. You three, Stevens II., Bastin and Ponsonby, will also come to my study at twelve-forty-five for a thrashing. A word with you, please, Mr. Sims." Strangeways moved hurriedly into the Common Room while the outraged headmaster swept past, towing Sims, as pale as dead Hector, at his chariot wheels. Strangeways unashamedly put his head to the study door and heard a dressing-down which made his ears tingle. Poor little devil, he thought, no one has ever given him a chance. Just like Vale to take up this line with him. Sarcasm, biting contempt, talking to him like he talks to one of the boys. Of course, Vale is really angry, indiscipline lets down the school; ergo, is an insult to himself. My hat, though, if any one spoke to me like that I'd break his head. But Sims is too crushed for that; the slave mentality. Chock-full of inferiority feeling no doubt. The way the boys seem to treat him would do it alone. Is there a point at which such slaves rebel? I wonder does a worm turn, in actual fact. Must find out whether Wemyss was numbered amongst his oppressors.

Sims returned, flushed and shaken, to his class-room, and Strangeways resumed his promenade. He smiled involuntarily as he stood outside Griffin's door. He was teaching history, Nigel realised at last, full of flagrant inexactitudes and gross caricatures of eminent personages. Nigel left him as Henry the Eighth, decapitating wives right and left with a ruler. There was enormous competition amongst his form for the place of honour on the block. No, if murder is there, thought Nigel, I'll eat all my hats and join the nudists. He moved farther down the passage. Tiverton's room. There was order here, but maintained at the cost of incessant nervous effort. The boys answered questions in respectful enough tones, but one felt that they would break out if the master let up his nervous pressure for a moment. There was no real sympathy between him and his pupils; they were not even united by the bond of fear, like the headmaster and his. I doubt if Tiverton is in the right job; he has enthusiasm, but no channel to communicate it here. Might have made a good scientist if he'd had more brains, or an expert connoisseur, perhaps, if he'd had the money. Murder? I doubt it. Too spinster-ish and comfort-loving. I imagine he's got a soft centre, too. But not absolutely off the cards.

Strangeways moved across the passage and stopped, quite startled, outside Wrench's room. Good Lord, what have we here? This man has something very near a genius for teaching, and at breakfast I thought he was just the usual scrubby pre-school nonentity. The silence in the room was one of rapt attention. Wrench's voice was confident and incisive, the faint Midland accent lending it a curious kind of distinction. Patient, illuminating, right on top of his work, Nigel said to himself. He's obviously got brains. Brains enough to plan a subtle murder, and the single-minded desire of the bright lower-middle-class lad to get somewhere. I can imagine him remorseless against anything that stood in the path of his ambition. But how could Wemyss? Supposing there was something that threatened to ruin his career; supposing Wemyss knew of it? Stop! We only want impressions so far; theories must wait for facts.

The bell rang for the end of the hour. Doors vomited forth a stream of boys. Evans came along and dragged his friend towards his own classroom. "You've got to come and take the part of Hamlet, if we succeed in doing any work at all. The boys have heard that there's a new sleuth on the premises, so you'll probably have to give a lecture on crime." A few minutes found Nigel, stripped to the shirt sleeves, a lath sword in hand, confronting the Laertes of Anstruther. Nigel was no actor; but, if he lacked dramatic talent, he was equally lacking in self-consciousness, and his boisterous abandon soon affected the other players. There was, perhaps, more sawing of the air, o'erdoing Termagant, and out-heroding Herod than the refined Prince of Denmark would have cared for; still, the Elizabethan gusto of the actors compensated for much. Laertes was truculent, Hamlet elaborately ironic. A small-ish, rabbit-faced boy, representing the king in a purple tablelcoth and a pie-frill crown, began to declaim:

"Set me the stoups of wine upon that table." Two advanced bearing lemonade bottles, while the court made ribald comments, not unconnected with the weakness of Mr. Gadsby.

"If Hamlet give the first or second hit,
Or quit in answer of the third exchange,
Let all the battlements their ordnance fire;
The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath;
And in the cup an onion shall he throw——"

The King was not allowed to proceed any further. Yelps and howls of mirth convulsed the company. Michael realised that it would take them the rest of the hour to recover from giggling fits, so he suggested that Strangeways might be willing to answer any questions they liked to ask.

The form leapt at the chance and plied him for many minutes, with the thirteen-year-old's quaint blend of sophistication and naïveté. Then Anstruther asked him how he would have gone about solving the mystery of his father's death, supposing he had been Hamlet. This opened the floodgates, and Nigel talked on and on to a spellbound audience. As the hands of the clock hovered over ten-thirty, he noticed that one of his audience had conceived an idea and wished to deliver it. He broke off. "Did you want to ask something special?"

"Sir, excuse my interrupting—" it was Stevens, the head boy, speaking —"but wouldn't it be fine if we could find out who killed Wemyss by acting the murder over again, like Hamlet made the players do before the king." Strangeways received the suggestion with perfect gravity. "Yes, that's a good idea. I'll remember it. And by the way," he said, striking while the iron is hot, "if any of you have any ideas about this business, I shall be in Mr. Evans' room after lunch. Remember, anything you know about Wemyss, any little detail you noticed that struck you as queer, however unimportant it may seem, may help a great deal." The bell rang, and Nigel left the room having made twelve hero-worshippers, allies, and possibly too zealous assistants.

Michael and his friend strolled into the Common Room, where they were received with friendly nods. Tiverton stretched out his cigarette case to Strangeways, looking at him quizzically. Strangeways took one, lit it, and said, "Anything wrong? They aren't opium, are they? Or have I a smut on the end of my nose?" Tiverton smiled, "Another illusion shattered! I've never read a detective story in which the great man didn't 'carefully select a cigarette from the case,' and I've always wondered how and why he did it when the case was generally full of Players."

"Just padding," said Wrench, "they can never spin a single crime over three hundred pages, so they either have to fill up with carefully selected drinks and smokes or make their criminal commit a few more murders."

Sims looked over the top of his *Daily Mirror,* "Let's hope our local criminal doesn't adopt your second alternative."

Wrench frowned and exclaimed irritably, "Oh, God, why is everybody always bringing up this subject? Need we all become monomaniacs just because we all suspect that one of us *is* a maniac?"

There was a painful silence. It was the first public appearance of a truth, so to speak, and it got the welcome that truths usually get on their first appearance. Nigel looked down his nose in a noncommittal way, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts—actually listening hard for the intonations of voices. Griffin pushed back his chair and said:

"A deep wedge of depression is moving quickly down from Iceland. There will be local soul-storms to-morrow."

"Look here, Wrench, that's a nasty thing to say," exclaimed Sims. "I mean, do you really think the murderer's a maniac? It's not a very agreeable thought."

"Don't you worry, Sims, nobody would hurt you," Wrench replied, the contempt in his voice scarcely veiled. Sims ducked back behind his paper. Gadsby, who had been trying in vain to get a word in, rasped in his throat, collected eyes like a hostess, making a marked exception of Wrench's, and said:

"Rather a morbid subject this. Let's change it. Well, Strangeways, getting any forrarder?"

"That is not changing the subject," remarked Wrench belligerently.

Gadsby ignored the objection, and continued to stare expectantly at Nigel, with his rather grisly animation of face—the expression of a galvanised corpse.

"Early days yet, Mr. Gadsby," said Nigel. "At present I'm so interested in the workings of a preparatory school that I have almost forgotten what I came here for."

"And what is your opinion of our workings?" asked Wrench, a little on the defensive.

"I think your boys are very lucky to be at school now and not thirty years ago. Nice Common Room you've got here. I've a dim recollection of the one at my own private school; no windows, one dusty skylight, a foil without the button in one corner and a broken brassie in another, on the table a Latin grammar without a cover, a bottle of invalid port, and a tooth tumbler. A very good expressionist picture of early twentieth century education."

There was general laughter, to which Gadsby added a rather puzzled contribution, "There's something in what you say," he remarked. "Talking of education, that reminds me, can't find my French prose book." He got up and began looking into lockers that lined the far wall. "Suppose it can't have got among your books by mistake, Tiverton?"

Tiverton turned round abruptly in his chair, "No, it could *not*. And will you kindly keep your nose out of my locker. You know perfectly well that there's an unwritten law here against snooping into other people's belongings in the Common Room."

Sims looked up in a worried way and Strangeways looked down his nose again. The aggrieved Gadsby said, "Oh, very well, very well. Seem to have put my foot in it again. Got *Lady Chatterley* tucked away in there, have you?"

A further outburst from Tiverton was averted by the entrance of the headmaster, "Oh, there you are, Strangeways. Getting acquainted with the—a-ah—genius loci? Now, is there anything you want, any assistance we can give you?"

"Well, yes, I should very much like a cup of tea."

"Tea? Ah, yes, to be sure, tea. I will have a cup sent in to the morning-room for you."

Nigel, looking, for him, almost bashful, asked if it might be a pot; to which the headmaster consented, though with the defeated air of one invited to take part in a round game whose rules he does not know. Nigel had only just poured out his third cup when Armstrong was announced. One or two preliminary remarks were passed, which made it clear to Nigel that the superintendent was sparring for a verbal opening, and he decided to get in his own word first.

"As you know," he said, "I have come down with a rather vague commission to investigate this case in the interests of the school. I should like to assure you at the outset that I shall be doing so in no spirit of antagonism to yourself. Naturally, I hope that I may be able to find a solution which will help to restore the school's reputation or, at least, damage it no further. But if I am forced to conclude that the criminal *is* connected with the school, I shall do my best to assist you in proving his guilt."

"That's fair enough, sir."

"Like a cup of tea? No? A cigarette, then. Now, as to my line of action. I know that you professionals get sick to death of amateur theorising. I therefore suggest that we pool the facts, but each keeps his theories to himself until he has a pretty complete case."

Armstrong studied his toecaps for a moment or two. He was faintly resentful of Strangeways having taken the initiative thus, nor was he too keen on a pooling of the facts, when all the facts at present were to be contributed by himself. On the other hand, the amateur was in a far better position than himself for the making of further discoveries. So, on the whole, it seemed best to strike the bargain. He therefore proceeded to give Strangeways a detailed and lucid summary of the course of the investigation up to date, "And you can see for yourself, sir," he concluded, "though we have decided to keep our theories to ourselves, that the facts so far are all pointing in one direction."

"Mrs. Vale and Evans?"

"Yes," said Armstrong, rather surprised by the other's matter-of-fact admission, "though I shouldn't have expected you to agree so readily."

"Why not? Evans is one of my best friends, but I shan't help him by shutting my eyes to all evidence against him. If I may sum up your own position, it is this. The murder was committed either by some one outside the school or some one inside. The movements of all vagrants known to be in the district have been satisfactorily accounted for, and besides, there was no sign of the body having been robbed. This, and the entire absence of possible motives, puts the first alternative practically out of court, though one must not altogether leave out of one's reckoning the man whom Wrench said he spoke to at the beginning of the sports. Take the second alternative. The time-limit appears to be fixed as from one to two-thirty p.m. From about one-forty-five to two-thirty the hayfield was in full view of Griffin and the groundsman. From one-thirty to one-forty-five, there was no one about outside, but the murderer could not reckon on this and it would have been dangerous in the extreme for him to have murdered the boy in the haystack or carried his body to it at a time when any one might come out of the school. There remains one to one-thirty, when every one's movements are accounted for, except those of Evans and Mrs. Vale, who admit that they were actually on the spot where the body was found."

"That's it, sir, the case against them seems the only possible one. But——"

"But you haven't got a single fact to support it except a piece of string that might come off any one of millions of balls, and a silver pencil, which seems to be rather a broken reed itself."

"It's extraordinary, Mr. Strangeways. I've never heard of a case where there were so few material clues. I've been over that field and all the grounds till I was sick. I've badgered the servants. I've searched the masters' rooms, though you needn't tell 'em that. Not a blessed thing to be found. And yet the motive: Mr. Evans and Mrs. Vale seem to have so much the strongest one."

"By the way, superintendent, I'm surprised that you had so little difficulty in obtaining confirmation of this motive."

Armstrong looked uncomfortable, but he could not ignore the question in Strangeways' remark, and was compelled to give an account of the stratagem he had employed in his last interview with Michael. Nigel stared ruminatively down his nose during this account, then said, "Well, you certainly don't use kid gloves. Don't think I am criticising you. You people wouldn't have much chance of catching criminals if you kept to the rules which they break. But there are two points which counsel for the defence can make——"

Armstrong, who had started very much on the defensive against the amateur, was now entirely at ease and asked him to expound.

"First, it seems unlikely that a murderer would admit from the beginning having been on the spot when the murder was committed. One would expect them either to have cooked up an alibi, or to have put the body somewhere else."

"It might be a bold kind of bluff, sir, to sidetrack suspicion by putting themselves in the most obviously suspicious position at the start."

"It might. That has been done, I know, but—well, anyway, my second point is this. Supposing the murder had been done from the motive you suggest, it's unnatural that a murderer should be so easily induced to betray his motive. One doesn't give up one's key position without making a fight for it, more of a fight than Evans seems to have made, at least."

"I see your point, sir. Yes, I admit that hadn't occurred to me. Of course, he might just have lost his nerve; though, after that little affair yesterday, my opinion of Mr. Evans' nerve has gone up considerably. Well, I must be getting along. I can see that you don't need much advice from me, but there is one line which I'd like to suggest. I can't manage to get anything out of the boys myself——"

"Damned little snobs, most of them, I bet," interrupted Nigel.

"That's just it, sir," said Armstrong gratefully, "and I believe that they are the only ones who might give us a line on——"

"On what it was that made Wemyss conceal himself so successfully till the murderer was at liberty to finish him for good?"

"Good Lord, Mr. Strangeways, either you're a thought reader, or else you ought to be running this case instead of me," said the superintendent with real admiration. And refusing another offer of tea—to Nigel's considerable relief, for there was little left, and he wanted a sixth cup—he took himself off.

Until lunch Strangeways wandered about in the school grounds. He tried, not very successfully, to visualise them as they were on the Sports Day; the running track, the flags, the crowd and the haystacks. He poked his nose into Mould's hut and pondered the question of the sacks. Someone must have moved them. The murderer? If so, why should he have transferred the body to the hayfield at all? It was hidden just as well in the hut. Why, you poor fool, because he wanted to gain time. He knew the hut would probably be visited before the sports, whereas the hayfield almost certainly would not be. He *knew.* You are already assuming that the murderer is familiar with the school arrangements. But, granted all this, the main difficulty is unresolved. *When* was all this done? You believe Michael and his young woman to be innocent; well then, that leaves from one-thirty to two-thirty. One-thirty to one-forty-five, unless the murder was committed while Griffin and Mould were on the big field. That has been assumed to be impossible. Is it? The walls of the haystack, Armstrong said, were tall enough to conceal a man stooping inside, therefore the murder might have been committed there unseen. But there still remains the fact that either the murderer, or his victim, or both, would be seen going from the school to the haystack. Of course, Griffin and Mould might have had their backs turned for a moment every now and then; but the murderer couldn't rely on this; it wasn't like dashing across a deck between waves. A murderer who has covered his traces so well is surely not the man to have trusted to luck at the most crucial point of his actions.

Try again. Is that two-thirty fixed? Medical evidence puts four p.m. as the outside limit. Was the murder done during the sports after all? But if it is not reasonable to suppose that a murderer would risk being seen by two people, surely it's far more wildly unreasonable to imagine that he would have taken the risk with two hundred or so. Supposing it was not done in the haystack at all, and the body put there later, say, when every one was at tea. That means it must have been done by some one outside the school, for boys and masters are all accounted for from tea time onwards. All very fine, but why in the name of the saints should any one take the trouble of carting the corpse back and dumping it down in a haystack. That's the most fantastic idea of all. The haystack. Why the haystack, anyway? Surely the solution lies there. If one could only grasp why the murder was done—or at any rate the body deposited—in such an eccentric place, such a public place, such a wildly paradoxical place, one would have the key of the riddle in one's hands.

Nigel strolled slowly back into the school, deliberately overlaying this crucial question with other minor ones, hoping it would soon dive into his unconscious mind and emerge in due season bearing the answer with it. It was not long, indeed, before other matters turned up which effectually diverted his attention. He was sitting in Michael's room after lunch when there was an impetuous knock at the door and a body entered with that unwilling and unseemly haste which, in a prep-school, usually indicates propulsion from behind by a bashful associate. The first figure shot several feet into the room, revealing itself as Anstruther. He was followed by Stevens, looking elaborately unconscious of his companion's unceremonious entry.

"Please, sir," they both said simultaneously, and stopped with a common blush.

"You go on, Stevens," said Anstruther.

"Please, sir, may we say something to Mr. Strangeways?"

"You may," Michael smiled affectionately at the head of the school, contrasting his unstudied diffidence with the contained and natural arrogance of his slight figure.

"We thought we ought to tell you, sir," the boy addressed Strangeways, "on the morning that Wemyss was murdered, there was a conversation about him at the prefect's table." Nigel suppressed a faint smile at the stilted opening, and Stevens continued.

"You see, sir, he was becoming rather a menace, I mean, he was a ghastly tick, really, and we thought it was about time he was suppressed."

Michael stirred uneasily. Heaven forefend that this should turn out to have been a joke that went too far. And Stevens, of all people.

"Of course, we couldn't do anything ourselves. Percy—Mr. Vale—wouldn't stand for us reporting a boy for ragging a master. So we decided to get my brother and his gang to deal with him."

"And did you?"

"I talked to my brother in recess, and he said he'd get some of his gang to beat up Wemyss after the sports. They call themselves 'the Black Spot'; a sort of secret society, it is, sir. Rather a childish business, but it seems to amuse them." Stevens spoke with an indulgent, one-man-of-the-world-to-another air, but there was an entirely boyish note of apprehension in his tones as well. It was at this point that Strangeways might very well have lost the battle. If he had taken up a stern moral attitude, or, worse still, if he had tried to laugh off the whole thing, the sensitive Stevens would have retired forever into his shell, and the train of events which finally led to the solution of the crime would never have been started. But Strangeways was neither a moralist nor a hearty blunderer.

"I see," he said, "that must have made things rather difficult for you and your brother, but I think you were quite right to tell me. And, of course, you needn't worry about it. I'm quite sure that neither of you is the murderer. But if you or he can give me any information, I'd be extraordinarily grateful, and it won't go any further than me, unless I think it absolutely necessary to tell the police about it."

Stevens gave him a smile of great sweetness, "That's jolly decent of you, sir. Of course, my brother didn't do anything. But perhaps it would be better if he told you himself. He wasn't funking it, you know, but—well—he thought at first you might be a mess, like that policeman johnny."

"I'd like to see your brother very much; how about this afternoon?"

"Well, he's been kept in then, but he could come up before tea, about half-past five, if that would do."

"Would he like to have tea here with me? Could that be arranged?"

"I'm sure he'd love to. But I don't know whether Mr. Vale would allow him," Stevens added dubiously.

"I think I can manage to get his permission," said Strangeways with unimpaired gravity. Stevens and Anstruther departed, casting glances of shy admiration at him, as unconscious as he that they were putting one end of the long and tangled clue in his hand.

Chapter VIII

INITIATION OF A DETECTIVE

Strangeways looked forward to his tea-party with mild curiosity. He went into the village and bought suitable cakes and a good supply of chocolate. Returning, he filled in time on the cricket field, in that pleasant mood composed of aesthetic rapture and expert attention which the cricket devotee shares only with the lover of music and the fisherman. In the middle of Big Field the first eleven were bowling against a second team stiffened by the inclusion of Griffin and Tiverton. For the second time since he had entered the school, Nigel was made aware of class; Wrench's teaching, and now Tiverton's batting. The man was a born cricketer. As Nigel watched him, dealing in his off-hand manner with some by no means despicable bowling, he found himself most irrationally crossing Tiverton off his list of suspects. No man who could bat like that would commit a mean and cowardly murder. Nigel seemed to have been there only a moment or two, held as he was in that timeless trance of the sky, green grass and gracious action, when he looked at his watch and found that it lacked but ten minutes till his tea-party.

He hurried indoors, boiled water, put out the food, and awaited his guest. There were two of them, as it happened. Stevens II. put his head round the door, gave Strangeways a frank stare, and asked, "Can I bring some one else?" "Of course, if you like, fetch him along." "That's O.K., sir, I've got him outside here." The face disappeared. A highly audible colloquy took place beyond the door. "Come on, he says you can come." "But look here, what will Percy say?" "Bother Percy! He'll have to do what the detective jolly well tells him." "What's he like?" "Decent. Do come on! There's milk chocolate on the table." "Oh, all right. You needn't pull my ear off." Stevens II. entered the room, towing a chubby, fiery-faced child behind him, whom he introduced as follows: "This is Ponsonby. He's my lieutenant. Don't trip over the table, you silly gowk."

Ponsonby, under the influence of cakes and chocolate, quickly became his natural self. The dictator had no reserve to shed; he discussed the merits of different kinds of iced drink, told Nigel all about his fleet of model aeroplanes, and becoming even more convivial, related several grossly scandalous anecdotes about members of the staff. When there was not a speck of food left on any of the plates, he summed up, "A jolly good binge, sir. Better than eating train-grease on cardboard in hall."

"Train-grease on cardboard?"

"He means toast and butter, sir. That's what we have for tea on Saturdays," explained Ponsonby.

"Butter!" said Stevens darkly. "Be your rank! Any fool knows it's margarine, or worse."

Nigel cut short what threatened to be a lecture on dietetics, "Well, I suppose we'd better be getting down to business. You were going to tell me something about Wemyss."

Stevens knitted his brow. He looked very like his elder brother now, but much more the man of action, the rough diamond, the potential leader.

"It's rather difficult," he said. "You see, it's not really about Wemyss at all. And if I tell you, it's betraying a secret of the Black Spot."

"Punishment—expulsion and disgrace," added his lieutenant portentously.

"So we thought perhaps—that is, if you would become a member of the Black Spot yourself——"

Strangeways just avoided saying, "It would be a great honour," realising that Stevens was not the person to accept grown-up politeness.

"I see what you mean."

"The trouble is that every one has to pass a test before we allow them into the society," continued Stevens doubtfully.

"A test?"

"Yes. An ordeal, sort of. To prove their courage and all that sort of thing."

"Couldn't I go through the ordeal?"

"Well, sir, we make them do rather funny things. I mean, it's all very well for boys, but I don't think it'd do for grown-up people," said the realist Stevens.

"Couldn't we make him an honorary member?" asked Ponsonby.

"Shut up, Pongo, I thought of that long ago, so snoo to you."

"I'd rather be a proper member, if you don't mind," said Strangeways; thereby, as he came to realise later, making a decision that was to lead him to the criminal.

"Oh, flip! That's fine! Are you sure you don't mind, sir? You could have the test to-morrow. We'll work it out to-night."

"You'll give me the same test as you give every one else?"

"Well, we make up a different one for each new candidate. It's more fun like that. But they're all the same sort of thing. You'll get your instructions to-morrow morning and report to me when you've finished, that is——" the boy broke off with a little confusion. There are limits to a dictator's scope of dictation.

Strangeways affected not to notice this and a time and place were arranged for the next meeting. From then till it was time to go, Stevens discarded his official dignity, he and Ponsonby finally leaving the room with repeated volleys of, "Thanks *awfully,* sir!" "Thanks *frightfully,* sir!" which made Nigel feel as if he had presented them with half the kingdoms of the world. They had scarcely gone when Stevens returned again and, putting his head in at the door, whispered, "I say, sir, you'll not tell any one about the test, will you, sir? It's supposed to be awfully secret." Nigel reassured him, though he felt by no means reassured himself. The boy had said that what he had to tell him was not about Wemyss at all. That was bad enough, and now he had to waste some valuable time to-morrow undergoing a probably most undignified initiation. Yet an intuition, which had helped him more than once before, told him that he was beginning to grow warm.

If he went to bed that night vaguely uneasy, a paper which was put in his hand the next morning as he strolled towards the Common Room sent him into a real panic. This is a bit too much, he thought, re-reading his instructions. I shall be landed in prison by this evening. It was a ragged piece of exercise-paper, with enough thumb-marks on it to make it a finger-print expert's paradise. There was a round splodge of ink at the top, the Black Spot, no doubt; underneath, in laborious capitals, ran the following legend:—

> "IF YOU WOULD BECOME A MEMBER OF YE ANCIENT AND HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF YE BLACK SPOT, YE MUST PERFORM AND COMITT BEFORE 2 P.M. TO-DAY THE FOLLOWING EXPLOITS. TO WIT:—
>
> 1. Chalk a white mustashe on the nimph of ye drynking fountain in Sudeley.
> 2. Ask Higgins, resident in ye hamlet aforsaid, to show you his famous scales, and bring back a description thereof.
> 3. Remove one rabitt trap from ye phesant cover of Lord Edgworth and keep ye same till the society demands it.
>
> N.B.—Exploits to be purpetrated in ye above order.

P.S.—If thou shirkest or failest in any you shall cease to be elligible for this society.

P.P.S.—Burn this paper. And if you divulge its contents, or any part of its contents, or anything whatsoever pertaining to ye Black Spot, to any living soul, the Black Spot will be put upon you and you may expect no mercy.

"R.I.P.

"(Singed) THE OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY."

This rigmarole, attesting alike to its author's wide reading and inventiveness, caused the sweat to stand out on its recipient's forehead. It appears to be either the jail or the nearest lunatic asylum for yours truly if he attempts to "perform and comitt" these fantastic feats, thought Nigel. But the adventurousness which had led him into many strange places made up his mind for him. He put a match to the sinister document, and went in quest of a bicycle, some information about Lord Edgworth's "phesant cover," and a piece of chalk. He chose a bicycle—the oldest one he could borrow—because some means of escape was clearly desirable, and a car would be far too conspicuous. Lord Edgworth's coverts were a couple of miles from the school, he learnt, in the opposite direction from the village and separated by a fence from the wood in which Urquhart had kept his fruitless vigil. The coverts, he was also told, were the haunt of all the local poachers and possibly not unfrequented by some of the Rev. Vale's young gentlemen. They were jealously patrolled by keepers. You may well say "R.I.P." thought Nigel.

It was after ten o'clock when he started. A morning heat haze, which was just giving way before the brassy stare of the sun, promised that his ordeal would be a physical as well as a mental one. His bicycle, too, creaked rheumatically, and he was conscious of a marked discrepancy between its plebeian frame and his own well-worn but still gentlemanly suit. As the village came in sight, Nigel found himself pedalling even slower. Practical jokes and crazy exhibitions were all very well in the heat of the moment, but this cold-blooded lunacy was a far different cup of tea. Apprehension became sheer horror when he arrived on the green in the middle of the village. The "nimph" was a substantial woman of uncertain age, her charms partially concealed by verdigris, standing in a eurythmic attitude in a large and unsavoury-looking basin of water. Moreover, she was attended by a group of village swains, wearing their Sunday best, who sat on the parapet of the basin. Nigel's nerve all but failed him. He was on the point of turning back, when the face of Stevens

II. rose up mutely reproaching before his mind's eye; what would that intrepid youth say if the great detective returned, a failure? He braced himself, leant his bicycle against a wall, and approached the group.

"Good-morning! A fine day!"

"Ar."

"Does Mr. Higgins live near here?"

"Ar. Keeps shop down street."

"I hear you've had a murder in the neighbourhood. A nasty business."

"Cor, Bert, that's a good 'un, that is. Detective gennulman from Lunnon 'e says, 'I hear you've had a murder in the neighbourhood.' That's a bloody good 'un, that is." Hoarse guffaws. A swain expectorated rudely at the eurythmic nymph. Nigel stuck to it. His brain was working furiously.

"I didn't know you'd heard about me."

"Found any clues like, mister?"

"One or two. We're getting along slowly."

"Detective gennulman asks we does Mr. Higgins live here. Gennulman be going to arrest Mr. Higgins, see?" remarked one logician.

"Gennulman better mind out. Mr. Higgins always drunk Saturday nights. Mr. Higgins powerful raging Sunday morning."

"No, I'm not going to arrest Mr. Higgins," Nigel assured them, to their visible disappointment. "Talking about clues, though, there's something I'm looking for. I want it badly. In fact, I'd give five shillings to any one who found it for me." At this point he clearly began to hold his audience. "Do you fellows know of any one who'd like to earn five shillings?" he added.

"See here, mister, what be looking for? Us might oblige 'ee."

"That would be very decent of you. I've got a theory that the young gentleman was murdered on the road between here and the school. His handkerchief is missing, and if my theory is correct, it should be somewhere in the ditches, or along the road, or perhaps it was thrown over the hedge," Nigel lied luxuriantly. "It'd take me a long time to do the whole search myself, and I don't want to ask the police, they're so busy. That handkerchief is worth five shillings to me. I'm always to be found at the school, if any one discovers it." His last remark was made to the vacant air, for the group had melted away like dew and were already half-way out of the village.

The green now seemed uninhabited; Nigel swung his leg over the parapet and waded through scum-covered water up to the nymph. He cast a glance over his shoulder, feeling rather like one about to commit an offence in Hyde Park. Luckily, he was too short-sighted to observe the windows on the edge of the green, at each of which one or more faces peered out from behind the curtains, deeply interested to see a "detective gennulman from Lunnon" at work. Many and heated were the arguments conducted throughout the next two days on doorstep and in public bar as to the exact meaning of the gentleman's activities. One school held that he was looking for more bodies in the basin, another that the brazen nymph had yielded up some vital clue to the mystery. The thick white moustache which, after the detective's humid departure, was found on her upper lip—and which, Nigel thought, rather improved her appearance—was zealously preserved and pointed out to visitors with pride as one of the local curiosities. The boys of Sudeley Hall, walking to church half an hour later, beheld it with uncontrolled glee. And there it remained, a mystery to all but three persons, till many days after a greater mystery was cleared up; till rain came and shaved it slowly away and restored to the nymph her proper femininity.

Nigel pocketed his chalk again and turned round. Twenty faces whisked behind curtains, as he climbed out and pushed his bicycle towards the next adventure, "Mr. Higgins, resident in ye hamlet aforsaid." He was so relieved to have got away from the nymph unarrested, that he failed to make the obvious correction between the nature of Mr. Higgins' residence and the object of his second quest. "Scales," he thought to himself, "a description thereof." This is just to test the candidate's powers of observation, it'll be as easy as drinking tea. He knocked at the door. After a long interval it was opened, disclosing a huge, bald man, with bloodshot eyes, in a state of bad temper and déshabillé.

"My shop ain't open on Sundays," this individual barked; "you 'ikers are a disgrace to the country, profaning the Sabbath, and tearing about the country in the nood."

"You've got me wrong, Mr. Higgins," remarked Nigel affably. "I am not a hiker, and if you look a little more closely you will observe that I am the reverse of noo—nude. And I'm sure no one could tear anywhere on this ghastly bicycle they've lent me."

"Well, what the 'ell do you want, then?"

"I'm staying in these parts, and I was told that I shouldn't go before I'd had a look at your famous scales. I'd be obliged if——"

Nigel broke off in considerable alarm. Mr. Higgins' whole head was rapidly going through a series of colour gradations, from tomato, through beetroot, to dark plum. He wheezed apoplectically in his throat, then lunged at Nigel, roaring out, "Corbooger, another of these blasted inspectors, are yer? I'll inspect yer." Nigel left two buttons and some shreds of cloth in Mr. Higgins' clutching hands, leapt on to his bicycle, and pedalled fast back along the way he had come, vowing vengeance on Stevens for leading him up the garden to that dishonest tradesman. When he had slowed down out of earshot, he began to realise that it was not a leg-pull on the boy's part. The keen, but closely limited imagination of a boy of that age had made Stevens assume that Strangeways knew all the local scandals, and the second test called for at least as much audacity to a boy's mind as the first.

Nigel had passed the frenzied handkerchief hunters, and was now breasting the last hill before Edgworth Woods came in sight. He wheeled his bicycle into the wood, leant it up against the high wire fence that separated neutral ground from no-man's-land—or rather, Lord Edgworth's land, bent down to take off his trouser-clips, straightened up with one hand on the wire—and found himself face to face with a very broad man in corduroy breeches carrying a gun.

The broad man stared at him in that curiously sombre and incriminating way that gamekeepers, parkkeepers, and policemen have. But Nigel was not in the least intimidated. His blood was up now, he felt on top of the world. Had Stevens II. witnessed his subsequent conduct, there can be little doubt that the dictator would have abdicated in his favour. Nigel put a hand through the wires and exclaimed genially:

"Lord Edgworth, I presume?"

"Naw," said the broad man, his stony stare wobbling a little.

"A gamekeeper, then, I daresay?"

"May be."

"Well, I should have thought you would know whether you're a gamekeeper or not. However, that is your affair. We will leave it aside for the moment. Do you——"

"Yurr," interrupted the broad man, pointing to a notice behind him, " 'Trespassers praasecuted,' see? So doan't you come climbing over this yurr fence."

"That's just what I was coming to talk to you about. Do you allow the Sudeley Hall boys in there? Because I've just seen two of them getting through the fence about a hundred yards down."

"Drat they boys!" exclaimed the keeper, "I'll skelp 'em." And he hurried off in the direction Nigel pointed out, leaving him to climb through into the preserve at his leisure. That was about all the leisure Nigel got for the next quarter of an hour. He had not penetrated ten yards into the wood when a pheasant rose up at his feet, honking like a flustered motorist. His heart almost leapt out of his mouth, and he could hear the keeper come pounding back at the noise. Nigel plunged into a patch of fern on his left and lay down panting under the lofty fronds.

The riot in front died down and stopped. The gamekeeper appeared, looked about him suspiciously, and approaching the patch of fern began to prod into it with the muzzle of his gun. Nigel was within a foot or two of being stunned by one of these prods, but then the danger receded, and after a few minutes he emerged from his lair and cautiously resumed the search for rabbit-traps. This time he walked very slowly. The birds had got used to him now or they were somewhere else, or something, and soon he was rewarded by the sight of a grassy, sandy bank, perforated with many rabbit holes. He approached, peered about him, ah! a wire noose on a stick. That must be a trap all right. He bent down and tugged it out of the ground. There was a rustling above him. For a second time that morning he straightened up to see the broad man staring at him.

"Caught this time, hey?" rasped the broad man, and bore down on him.

"Not quite, but here's one of the traps they set—little devils!" Nigel peered into the trees, and suddenly shouted, "By jove, there they are! Quick! We'll get 'em this time," pocketed the trap and rushed wildly off, drawing the bemused keeper after him. He had not run long before the keeper was outdistanced, and soon he was climbing through the wire fence again. His bicycle was nowhere to be seen, but he took his bearings by the sun and began to walk along the leafy path in the direction of the road. He had not gone more than a hundred yards when he heard voices in front. Thinking that the keeper might have moved with reinforcements to intercept him, he crept slowly towards the sounds. Then he stopped dead. He had recognised one of the voices; it was Wrench; he was talking to a woman.

"I tell you there's nothing to be frightened about. You keep your mouth shut and we're safe as houses," Wrench was saying.

"I can't help it. I'm afraid of that Mr. Armstrong. I'm sure he suspects something. He looks at me fair awful. I know he'll make me tell him."

"I'll wring your pretty neck if you let out anything till I give the word. Don't you see it'll ruin me if you tell the tale? That old swine Gadsby has started dropping hints, and God knows how soon they won't come to Vale's ears as it is. You'll damn well keep quiet, my girl. Time enough to come out with the story if they begin to suspect—the other thing."

"I don't believe you care for me a bit, Cyril. I'm just a toy, that's all.

All you care about is your rotten old reputation. Oh, sir, why did you ever——?"

"Shut up!" snapped Wrench, "don't talk like the films. Any one'd think you were a poor, innocent little thing seduced by the villain, instead of——"

"Damn you, I hate you."

Nigel had been pushing cautiously forward, wishing to identify the woman; her voice seemed somehow familiar. A flaunting red dress; a servant's Sunday finery. "Curse my short sight. What the hell's the use of a short-sighted detective?" He edged nearer still. "Yes, it's that girl Rosa." His foot slipped and he lurched heavily sideways in the undergrowth. The girl screamed. Wrench sprang to his feet and ran, dragging her with him. Nigel could have kicked himself. What might he not have missed? Well, at least they hadn't seen him. He was sure of that. He allowed a decent interval to elapse, then walked on, found his bicycle, and rode slowly back to the school, deep in thought.

Michael had told him about the fracas between Wrench and Gadsby, and the superintendent had mentioned his suspicion that Rosa knew more than she would say. Wrench, a thruster, eager to get on, one of the children of this world. Rosa the flesh, and probably the devil too. Let's get it clear. She was not to tell the tale unless the police began to suspect "the other thing." If she told the tale Wrench would be ruined. What sort of thing would ruin Wrench? Obviously the discovery of his intrigue with Rosa. But under what circumstances would Wrench ever allow this intrigue to be made public? Surely only if some worse danger threatened—the "other thing," in fact. And what could that be but the suspicion of his having committed the murder. How could confession to an intrigue remove this suspicion? It would have to be in the form of an alibi. Nigel remembered the account of her movements Rosa had given the superintendent. She had felt unwell and gone up to her room about two o'clock, remaining there till a few minutes after two-thirty. The "tale" then would be that Wrench was with her during that period. But might it not be true? Wrench was given to slangy expressions. He might have meant "tell the true tale," and again, he might not. His alibi for two to two-thirty was weak enough—reading in his room. But why two to two-thirty? How could Rosa help him by saying he was in her room then, when all the evidence seemed to show that the murder must have been committed before that period? Look at it from the other side. If Wrench did the murder, he must have done it between two and two-thirty, that being the time for which he is reserving his stronger alibi. No, not two-thirty, a few minutes after. The superintendent said that no one saw Wrench during the first race. But Wrench himself trotted out a yarn about a man in a brown suit, to give the impression that he was in the field when the sports began. That is probably a part of his first and weaker alibi. He will say he made it up in order to avoid confessing that he had been with Rosa. If he committed the murder, then, it was between two and a few minutes after two-thirty. But Griffin and Mould were on the field from two to two-fifteen, and after that more and more people were swarming on to it. Nigel's head grew dizzy with these tail-chasing arguments, and he was glad to find himself back at the school, ready to hear whatever Stevens II. had to say.

The two boys came up immediately after lunch. Nigel was eager to begin questioning them, for the idea conceived after his second exploit had been greatly strengthened by the third. However, he had first to undergo the ceremony of initiation into the secret society. He gave an account of his adventures and handed over the rabbit-trap. He was then blindfolded, while the dictator read a kind of confirmation service over him, in the course of which he was compelled to swear a number of very solemn and magniloquent oaths. Finally, the bandage was removed, a large black spot of ink was printed on his right wrist, and he was a full member of the society. The dictator and his lieutenant now changed into Stevens II. and Ponsonby. The hunt was up.

"Sir, it's about the day Wemyss was murdered. At breakfast me and Ponsonby arranged to meet in Mouldy's hut to transact important private business of the society," the dictator reeled out the last phrase in character, and was immediately transfigured into Stevens II. again. "We oiled out as soon as lunch was over—it's quite easy, you know, sir—and hid——"

"Behind the sacks, against the right-hand wall of the hut as you go in," interposed Nigel nonchalantly. The boys' eyes rounded. Ponsonby said, "Gosh, sir, how did you know that? You must be a jolly good detective. Are you head of Scotland Yard?"

Nigel was unaccustomed to the point-blank praise of small boys, and blushed a little, "No, far from it. But do go on, this is frightfully interesting."

"There isn't really anything more. We talked for a long time. You see, my brother had asked me about the gang's beating up Wemyss, so we had that to arrange too. Then we hurried back into school just before changing time."

"Why, Stevens wanted to tell you, sir——" broke in Ponsonby.

"Put a sock in it, Pongo! We thought we ought to tell you, sir, because the policeman asked if any one had been outside the house after lunch and of course we couldn't tell him because it was the Black Spot and deadly secret."

"I see," said Nigel, thinking that they had been very lucky in not giving away their secret to Armstrong, for it could not have failed to put them under official suspicion. "So I take it you didn't set eyes on Wemyss while you were going in or out."

"No, sir, I'm afraid we haven't been much help," said Stevens, with pathetic eagerness.

"You've cleared up one difficulty, and I rather think that if you will answer some more questions, you will have done more than any one else could to solve the mystery."

"Oh, whoopee! Ask me, sir!" "Ask me!"

"Well, then, first of all, I suppose Wemyss wasn't a member of the Black Spot?"

"I should think he jolly well wasn't, slimy little chizzer!" Stevens clearly did not subscribe to the de mortuis doctrine.

"Is it possible that he could have thought he had a chance of being elected?"

"Oh, I should think so; he was sidey enough, anyway."

"Now I want to get it quite clear. How do you go about the business of deciding on new members?"

"Stevens generally decides himself," put in Ponsonby, with a certain air of grievance. Nigel could well imagine it.

"Slit your gullet, Pongo! We have a general meeting of the gang, sir—there are supposed to be six besides the dictator and the lieutenant—then, if every one agrees on a person, we give him an ordeal, like we did you."

"Supposing the person doesn't want to be a member? I mean, how do you find out if he wants to be? Do you sound him about it beforehand?"

"Sometimes, sir. Generally we just give him the instructions straight away."

"But do most people in the school know about the Black Spot? What I mean is, when you just give the instructions without talking to the person beforehand, how does he know it's not a leg-pull? Would he have heard about the society's method of initiation?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. At least, he'd know about the Black Spot. Of course, it's supposed to be absolutely secret, but I expect most of the school know about the sort of things we do." The realist spoke again.

"So if a boy got a set of instructions, and wanted to become a member of the society, he would follow them out without telling any one about them?"

"Mm. Rather."

Nigel sat back and lit a cigarette. So far, everything seemed to be bearing out his bizarre theory. He went on again, approaching the crucial question.

"You said yesterday that you made up a different test for each new member. What sort of tests have they been?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Playing jokes on the masters, altering the school clocks, hiding Sweeny's bell, scouting about the country like you did, sir, and so on."

"Stevens had a jolly nippy idea for one last term, sir," said Ponsonby, "only it never came off. He was going to tell a chap to disappear for an hour. He could go anywhere he liked in the school or the grounds, but no one must see him."

Nigel's heart leapt strongly. So he had been right, after all. His fantastic theory was vindicated. He controlled his voice and said carelessly:

"That was a good one. Why didn't it come off?"

"Well, sir, you see, it was like this. We'd written out the instructions, and folded them up and passed them along to the chap in form, but the master saw it and confiscated it."

Glory be, thought Nigel, this is too good to be true. He went on, "But didn't the master make a fuss about it? I should have thought that would have been the end of the Black Spot. Or did he just tear it up without reading it?"

"No, sir, Simmie was jolly decent about it. He's not a bad sort of beezer at all, if he wasn't such an absolute ass. I didn't see him tear it up, but he can't have reported it to Percy or we should have got tanned. Percy is frightfully down on all that sort of thing. Simmie just gave us some lines for passing notes in form and didn't say anything more about it."

Sims! Good Lord, Sims! Well, well, well. "Why does every one rag Mr. Sims, if he's a decent kind of man?"

"Oh, well, sir, he is such an ass. I dunno. You just can't help it. It's quite safe, too, he never does anything but set you some lines, and he generally forgets to collect them; at least, he used to; but now he writes them down in that black book he carries about with him. 'Doomsday book,' he calls it."

"It doesn't always seem quite safe to rag in his room," remarked Nigel meaningly. Stevens and Ponsonby shifted uncomfortably on their seats.

"That was just bad luck. We'd forgotten Percy was in school that hour. I say, my bim's jolly sore still. Isn't yours, Pongo? Old Pedantic swings a pretty hefty cane."

"Well, here's a bob to buy some medicine. Chocolate, applied internally, is quite a good remedy, I'm told."

"Thanks *awfully,* sir." "Thanks *frightfully,* sir. I say, sir, have we really been any help?"

"Don't let out a word of our conversation to any one. You've as good as told me how the murder was committed."

"Gosh!"

Chapter IX

RETROSPECTS AND PROSPECTS

As soon as the boys had left, Nigel went to look for Sims. The question was, how to bring up the subject of the paper that Sims had confiscated without arousing his suspicion. No, thought Nigel, that won't do. If he is the murderer, and worked on the lines I'm certain the murderer did work on, he is bound to be suspicious. And if he is innocent, he'll still be automatically on the defensive; he's probably got a first-class persecution mania, and that'll make him morbidly sensitive of trouble in the air, however much I try to conceal it. No use trying tact or tactics. He'll be put most at ease if I appeal to him as to an equal and put the facts straightforwardly.

Sims' room was like himself, colourless, ineffectual, rather pathetic. He had tried to liven up the regulation school environment with a few touches of his own, Nigel noticed—a second rug, a couple of reproductions of Dutch masters, a huge and elaborate desk; but somehow they made no difference; they seemed to have absorbed their owner's air of failure—they looked as out-of-place and stranded amongst the ordinary furniture of the room as did Sims himself amongst his colleagues. The books, too, Nigel observed, while Sims trotted about looking for cigarettes—what an incredibly miscellaneous collection! Novels representative of the whole possible gamut of taste, thereby betraying the complete absence of it in Sims; a whole shelf full of the Christian mystics and meaty-looking tomes of evangelical sermons; the most boring of modern poets rubbing shoulders with the most respectable of classic ones; elementary text-books on almost every conceivable branch of human knowledge, as though Sims had hurried from subject to subject looking for his métier and always been disappointed. The bookcase was a museum of false starts and broken hopes. It filled Nigel with pity. He felt as if he was about to vivisect a lost dog.

"Is one allowed to ask how you're getting on?" said Sims.

"Oh, rather. I've found out quite a lot to-day, entirely by accident. I'm beginning to think I've got the explanation of the difficulty that has been holding up the case."

"Have you really? Dear me! You mean——?"

"Well, you have no doubt wondered what it was that induced Wemyss to disappear so mysteriously after school that morning."

"I—why, yes, it did seem very unaccountable, unless he was murdered almost at once. Surely he must have been. Some one would have seen him otherwise, wouldn't they?"

"That does seem probable, on the face of it. But the problem still remains, what made Wemyss go—like a lamb to the slaughter, so to speak—at all? What made him miss lunch, for instance? And, though you couldn't have guessed it, you've had the answer in your own hands."

Sims blinked and looked worried. "I? Dash it all, Strangeways, whatever do you mean?"

"Do you remember last term confiscating a note that was being passed in form? Written in capitals, with a round splodge of ink at the top, something about the Black Spot?"

"Bless my soul! However did you get to hear of that? Yes, it was some ridiculous nonsense about a secret society—telling somebody he was to disappear for an hour. Disappear!" Sims' eyes blazed behind his thick spectacles, "Great Scott, Strangeways, I see what you're driving at. You mean, one of the boys sent a similar note to poor Wemyss—but that implies that this boy killed him. No, I can't believe that. They're perhaps rather too high-spirited at times; but murder—no, no, it's impossible."

"There again I'm inclined to agree with you, though I don't know how the superintendent will take it. Tell me, what did you do with the note? Is it possible that one of the servants could have got hold of it?"

"Oh no; we destroyed it. You see, I happened to make some comment or other about it in the Common Room, and we—er—in short, we decided to destroy it."

"We?"

Sims looked more worried than ever. He bent his head in thought. "Look here, Strangeways, is the superintendent in your confidence?"

"I haven't told him about this development yet, but of course I shall have to."

"I see. I hate the idea of getting other people into trouble, but——"

Nigel said gently, "In so far as the knowledge of this note is potentially incriminating, you are bound to be technically under suspicion yourself, I'm afraid."

"Oh dear; yes, of course. How awful! But that does seem to make it a bit better. Well, let me see: Wrench had a look at the note. Who else was there? Oh, of course, Evans. I remember that because it was he who suggested that we should let it go no further. He said something about these secret societies being a sign of vitality and inventiveness, and that it would be a pity to stamp it out. I daresay he's right. He knows a great deal about boys—but then, he is so popular with them. Somehow I never seem to have got the knack of it like he has."

"I heard two of them singing your praises just now, anyway."

"Did you really?" Sims' face quite lit up. "That's very gratifying. I'm afraid you must form a poor opinion of me, getting so much pleasure out of a little thing like that. But it's the breath of life to us schoolmasters—to find that our labours are sometimes appreciated."

Nigel managed tactfully to arrest the heart-to-heart talk which seemed imminent, and after making certain that the knowledge of the Black Spot note had been confined to Sims, Wrench and Evans, took his leave. It was now time to let Superintendent Armstrong into these discovered secrets. He had only paid one visit to the school in the last two days, though there was always a constable about the place—"just to see that none of us makes a bolt for it," as Griffin said, to the general discomfiture of the Common Room. Armstrong was evidently relying on Strangeways to provide an opening for his next move. Nigel asked Mrs. Vale if she would mind driving him in to Staverton before tea. Hero was quite willing. She had only seen him in company up till now, and felt a recurrent jealous impulse to measure her influence with Michael against his.

Nigel was sensible of the faint antagonism beneath her off-hand manner—she resents my being able to do more for Michael than she can, he thought—and set himself to dispel it.

"How is your husband feeling about things now?" he asked.

"The condition is unchanged. The bottom of his world has been knocked out, but he'll grow a new one soon enough unless the parents start removing their boys." She spoke bitterly. Nigel winced inside himself. He disliked superficial cynicism in women, just as much as he liked their natural, deep-centred irony. There was consequently a marked evasiveness in his reply when she asked him how he was getting on with the case. Her hand tightened on the wheel and she wrenched the car petulantly round a corner.

"The flippancy of the post-war woman distresses you, I see. Don't you realise that my husband means simply nothing to me now? I love Michael and I don't care what happens as long as he is happy."

"I know that you love Michael and that no one could make him so happy as you. But I imagine your husband meaning nothing to you now is more of a wish than a fact. You can't live with a person for several years without forming some relationship, and personal relationships don't suddenly vanish into thin air. The truth is, you're angry with yourself for not being able to break the ties between yourself and your husband."

"You win, Mr. Strangeways—Nigel," she said, touching his hand. "You seem to know so much about me that I'm sure you'll forgive my exhibition of bad temper. Oh, it's terrible. It's like a nightmare. There is Michael, stretching out his hands to me, wanting me so badly, and I try to run to him and it's like running through deep sand. Tell me, they don't still suspect him, do they?"

"I'm afraid they suspect both of you. You see, the case against you is the only possible one that can be built on the facts the superintendent has got so far. However, I've something to tell him now which may change his ideas. By the way, I shall be some time. You'd better not wait for me. I'll get a bus back."

"No, I'll wait. But what makes *you* so sure we didn't do it?"

Nigel laughed. "Oh, I'm not a very good detective. If I was the proper inhuman, cold-blooded, scientific sleuth, I should probably be suspecting you hard. But I'd always believe my friends sooner than the facts."

"You *are* nice, Nigel. I shall stop being jealous of you."

They soon reached the Staverton police station, whence they were directed to Armstrong's own house. Hero arranged to call back for Nigel in three-quarters of an hour and he went in to see the superintendent. Preserving a discreet reticence about the events that had led up to it, he related the conversation he had heard in Edgworth Wood, and then told Armstrong of the confiscated note, the procedure of the Black Spot and his talk with Sims. Armstrong was not slow to draw the same deductions as Nigel had.

"Well, sir, I always suspected that some of those boys must have known more than they cared to let out. But it's you who've proved it and I'm very grateful. The Chief Constable is getting a bit restive, though he hasn't been able to suggest any other lines that I could work on. Now I shall be able to make a move. I'll come up this evening and chivvy that Rosa first. Once we've got the real story out of her, we can deal with Wrench. It seems pretty clear that he was either with Rosa after two o'clock, or committing the murder. But the question still remains—how? We've more or less decided that it couldn't have been done after one-forty-five, when Griffin and Mould came out."

"Well, we've just got to find a loophole, that's all."

The superintendent shifted in his chair and fingered his top coat-button. "Sims and Evans knew about this note, too," he said with some hesitation. Nigel looked down his nose. "What I mean is," went on the superintendent, "I take it we are agreed that the murderer wrote a similar note to Wemyss, telling him that he was to remain hidden from twelve forty-five—for an hour, or till the Black Spot came and found him, or something like that—told him to hide in the haystack, to my way of thinking," Armstrong concluded firmly.

"He couldn't have hidden there at once. Evans and Mrs. Vale were there," replied Nigel with equal firmness. The superintendent shrugged his shoulders. "You're welcome to your own opinion, sir, but you can't expect me to alter mine. Evans knew the contents of the Black Spot instructions. What's more, it was he who originally suggested that Sims and Wrench and himself should hush it up——"

"Which proves absolutely nothing at all," interrupted Nigel sharply.

Armstrong's brow furrowed. "You don't need to tell me that, Mr. Strangeways. Nor does the fact that Mr. Evans is your friend prove that he didn't commit the murder. Anyway, it was simple enough for him to have slipped a note in Wemyss' desk, say, telling him to hide in the haystack immediately after lessons, and then to have slipped out himself at one o'clock and strangled him——"

"With Mrs. Vale applauding loudly from the front row of the stalls!"

"You will have your little joke, sir. Well, at least you must admit that she and Mr. Evans had about a hundred per cent better an opportunity to pull it off than any one else—to say nothing of motive."

"Oh, yes, I admit all that," said Nigel wearily, "but you'll not get me to believe that either of them strangled that wretched youth, unless you produce about three independent eye-witnesses. And what about that anonymous note to Urquhart? How on earth was Evans to know that he had been embezzling Wemyss' money?"

"It is possible that Mrs. Vale had found out. Or, as you said yourself, sir, it might have been a shot in the dark."

"Seems to me a mad sort of thing to have done. Unless the murderer was pretty sure that Urquhart had been up to some dirty work, he could not have relied on his burning the note."

"Well, at any rate, he did go to the wood. His servants confirm his absence, and my men report that his car was seen outside the wood at one-fifty. By the way, Tiverton, Wrench, Evans and Mr. Vale himself own typewriters."

Nigel leant forward earnestly. "Look here, let's assume—just for argument's sake, if you like—that the murder was not committed by Evans and Mrs. Vale or till after one-thirty. What follows? First of all, that Wemyss could not have been in the haystack. That implies that he was given instructions to perform more than one exploit. Now I happen to know"—Nigel spoke rather hurriedly here—"the sort of things Stevens' gang make people do: practical jokes they are, mainly. Do we know of anything in the nature of a practical joke that took place that day?"

"No, I don't thing anything came to light—by Jove, though, how about that extra set of hurdles? Mould swore he'd put out the right number."

"Good for you, Armstrong, you've got it! A perfectly sound practical joke, and it would have come off if Griffin hadn't gone out to make sure that Mould hadn't committed one of his apparently frequent bloomers."

"Perhaps it *was* one of his apparently frequent bloomers," said the superintendent slyly.

"And perhaps not. Assume it was not. We can begin to get some idea of Wemyss' movements. He couldn't safely do his hanky-panky with the hurdles before lunch, because some of the Day Room windows look on to the field. For the same reason he couldn't have done it after lunch. Therefore he must have done it during lunch—the dining-hall faces the opposite direction. Well, then, on my theory he hid somewhere from twelve forty-five till one; then put out the extra hurdles; then hid again till he went into the haystack—or there might have been some other feat he had to perform before that. Or he may have been told to go into the haystack as soon as he'd done with the hurdles, but found that it was occupied and had to wait till Evans and Mrs. Vale went in. There were five other haystacks to hide in."

The superintendent was shaking his massive head slowly and ponderously. "Thin, sir; much too thin, and all resting on what was very likely an ordinary mistake of the groundsman's. Besides, sir, I just can't stomach all this coincidence: the murderer *and* your friends choosing the same haystack; the murderer and his victim conveniently waiting till your friends were gone before they did their act. Here, sir, are you feeling ill?" Nigel had gone pale and his eyes were bulging in his head. He shook himself. "No, thanks, I'm quite all right. You've just put a pretty staggering idea into my head. But I'm going to exercise our agreement to keep theories to oneself—just for a bit, at any rate. It's thin, you see—very thin."

He wagged his head with an impertinent imitation of the superintendent, which caused that worthy to chuckle fatly in his bull neck, and to opine that Mr. Strangeways was a one. He then suggested that Mrs. Vale might take him back to the school with Nigel. The three-quarters of an hour had not quite elasped, so Armstrong shouted to his "old woman" to brew their guest a pot of tea. By the time he had drained the greater part of this, Hero had returned and the superintendent dragged him unwillingly into the car.

When they reached the school, Armstrong drew Nigel aside and asked him if he would be present at the interview with Rosa. The maid was sent for. Nigel eyed her curiously as she came into the morning-room. She was still in the red dress, that showed the division of her breasts and the sleek contour of waist and thighs. She moved to a chair with a slinky, arrogant gait obviously modelled on that of her favourite film actress; a synthetic gentility sat strangely on her broad country face and body. As she passed Nigel she gave him the steady, challenging stare of the born wanton. Then she turned to the superintendent, a very different expression on her face. Nigel wondered what line of attack Armstrong would take up. He could feel the man's crude but powerful personality imposing itself upon the girl. Armstrong stared at her ruminatively for a moment or two.

"You know, a spell in prison would do you no harm, young woman," he began suddenly. Rosa started and relapsed again.

"Pardon?" she said in an off-hand way, patting a curl into place.

"And I've a good mind to put you there, what's more."

Her eyes flickered. "Lord, what have I done now? Have you nothing better to do on a Sunday than to come bullying a harmless girl?"

"Just a little matter of giving false evidence to the police, that's all."

"I don't know what you mean, I'm sure."

The superintendent hunched himself together, like a rhinoceros about to charge, and said quietly, "You were telling the truth, then, when you said you were alone in your room from two till two-thirty on the day of the murder?" There was the faintest accent on the word "alone." Rosa twisted a handkerchief in her thick fingers. "Really, Mr. Armstrong, I don't know what—of course I was." Armstrong half raised himself from his chair and barked out, "Oho! So Mr. Wrench was not with you, *after all.*"

"Yes. No. Oh, do leave me alone!" Rosa's self-possession had collapsed. Her lip trembled. The rouge, standing out on her pallid cheeks, made her look like a doll. The superintendent pressed home his attack.

"Yes? No? You must know if you were alone or not. Speak up, my girl."

"You make me so confused. Yes, I tell you, I *was* alone."

Armstrong sat back and threw a meaning glance at Nigel, saying mildly:

"That looks bad for Mr. Wrench, don't it, sir?"

"Looks bad? Oh God, what do you mean, sir? You're not——"

"Well, if he wasn't in your room, we can make a very good guess where he was. That's all."

Rosa stifled a sob; clenched her fingers; said in a flat voice, "He *was* in my room," and burst out with hysterical weeping. Nigel felt ill at ease. He didn't much care for bull-baiting, even in the interests of justice; and he detected a kind of sadism beneath the superintendent's expression. Armstrong waited till the girl's outburst was over. Finally he said, "So Wrench was in your room, was he? What makes you change your mind about that all of a sudden?"

"Oh, sir don't go on at me so! Cyril—Mr. Wrench said I was not to tell you, unless——"

"Unless?"

The girl buried her face in her hands. They could hardly hear her next statement.

"Unless he—unless you suspected him of having something to do with the murder."

"And how am I to know you're telling the truth this time?" asked Armstrong bluntly. "How am I to know you've not cooked up this story between you to conceal the fact that Wrench really was——?"

"You must believe me! You must! I swear it's the truth!" Rosa sprang up wildly. Her face was burning. Her body trembled as though an electric current was passing through it. She looked very handsome now, as she turned to Nigel with a tense, unstudied movement of the hands, and cried, "Please, sir, please make him believe me!"

"Well, well," remarked the superintendent, "if you want us to believe you, you must tell us all the facts—the truth this time. When did he come up to you?"

"Just after I went up. We'd arranged it. I pretended I was feeling ill."

"And he left you at two-thirty?"

"I don't know the exact time. A pistol went off outside, and Cyril said, 'Good Lord, that's the first race starting. I shall be late,' and he ran downstairs."

"He was in your room all the time?"

"Yes, haven't I just told you?"

"Describe the clothes he was wearing."

"Reely, I don't know if I can remember. He had a blue suit on, I think, and that pink tie of his, I remember that."

"Now, think carefully. What exactly did he do when he came into your room?"

"Why, I scarcely like to tell you, sir," said Rosa, with a faint return of her coquettish expression.

"We'll take all that for granted. But, besides making love to you, did he say or do anything—something he might remember which would prove that he was with you?"

"Well, he went to the mantelpiece and took up a photograph of my brother and asked who it was. And he kept on saying how dangerous it was for him to be in my room—in a fair panic he was, half the time."

"Very well. That is all I want from you just now."

The girl got up and moved hurriedly to the door. "Not so fast, not so fast," said Armstrong. He rang the bell and sent for the constable, whom he ordered to keep Rosa under his eye for the next five minutes. "We'll just go and see what Mr. Wrench has to say about all this." As they went along the passage and up the stairs Armstrong said, "They seem to have got their story pretty pat, eh?"

"You mean, you believe it?"

"Either it's true or that girl's a damn good actress, sir."

"And if she's telling the truth, Mrs. Vale must be a damn good actress?" The superintendent shrugged his shoulders.

Wrench received them with his usual half-defensive, half-aggressive manner. While Armstrong indulged in a little light conversational skirmishing, Nigel took mental impressions of the room. It was the ordinary schoolmaster's sanctum, overlaid with a thin veneer of aestheticism. He strolled idly over to the bookcase: French novels; the brighter young poets; left wing, but not too extreme, political writers; and a number of educational treatises, which had clearly seen more service than their companions. Nigel suspected that Wrench's aesthetic and political extravagances were little more than exhibitions to assert his personality amongst his colleagues—a common enough manifestation of inferiority feeling: the main current of his vitality ran through his schoolwork, his career. Nigel went back to his chair and looked noncommittally down his nose. Wrench was saying:

". . . But I don't suppose you've visited me just for a spot of light conversation."

The superintendent took the hint and proceeded to ask Wrench about the Black Spot note which Sims had confiscated. Oh, yes, he remembered the occurrence and the contents of the note. Yes, Evans had also been present and suggested that no official notice should be taken of it. But what connection had this with the case? Armstrong explained Nigel's theory; Wrench's eyes widened and he whistled between his teeth. The superintendent then unmasked his heaviest battery. "Now, sir," he said, his voice grown suddenly harsh and unfriendly, "perhaps you will explain what you meant by giving me an entirely false account of your movements about the time of the murder?"

A spasm contorted Wrench's face, but he said coolly enough, "So you've been third-degreeing Rosa, have you? Well, you can't do that sort of thing to me. I shall consult a solicitor. Do I have to remind you of the judge's rules?"

"Don't talk to me like that, young man! If you don't come out with your new story pretty quick I shall hold you on a charge of obstructing the police." Armstrong's emphasis of the "new" was not lost on Wrench. "Oh, very well," he said. "I couldn't bear to obstruct you any longer. What *did* Rosa say?"

"Now, now, now, Mr. Wrench; don't try and put that stuff across on me. *I'm* asking *you* for your movements between one-thirty and two-thirty on the day of the sports."

"As I originally told you, except that I was in Rosa's room from two till two-thirty. Shocking, isn't it?" Wrench's tone rasped on Nigel's nerves.

"Two-thirty? You were on the field for the first race, were you?"

Wrench's eyes narrowed. After a pause he said, "Not exactly. The pistol went off when I was in her room. I ran downstairs at once and was on the field by the end of the race."

"And what was the point of your story about talking to a parent. Why not have said that you were reading in your room till two-thirty?"

"I had intended to, but during the sports a boy—Smithers—told me that he'd gone up to my room a minute or two before the sports began to bring me an impot., and hadn't found me there, so I thought it safer to invent the man in a brown suit."

"And you expect us to believe all this?" said Armstrong heavily.

"Well, of course; hasn't Rosa told you the same? You couldn't expect me to admit what I'd really been doing. It's the end of me, as it is—look here, superintendent, you don't need to come out with all this to the headmaster, do you?"

"You mistake me, sir. I'm asking how you expect us to believe this new story when your original one was just a pack of lies. How do I know that you and Rosa have not made it up between you?"

"Why on earth should we make it up? Do you think I want to ruin my career?"

"Under some circumstances, you might."

"What is the man driving at now?" said Wrench, turning with a nervous smile to Nigel. The latter was getting rather tired of Armstrong's delayed action tactics and spoke abruptly, not looking at Wrench: "He wants just to be sure you weren't compassing the sheer doom of young Wemyss, that's all."

Wrench started; his next words sounded indignant and alarmed. But Nigel felt that the start, the indignation and the alarm were forced; Wrench knew all along what the conversation was leading up to. Armstrong let him cool down and then asked him what confirmation he had of Rosa's story. None, he said at first. But by judicious questioning the superintendent elicited the details already given by Rosa about his clothing and the photograph on the mantelpiece. They left him, still retaining his assumed jauntiness, but looking decidedly the worse for wear. The superintendent was obviously put out by Nigel's intervention and pointedly refrained from asking his company on his next visit, which was to Sims. Nigel, too, had had enough of Armstrong's company; he was impatient to have a talk with Michael. That notion which Armstrong had put into his head—it all fitted in—yes, he must verify it at once.

Michael looked up at his friend with unconcealed eagerness as he entered the room. "And where have *you* been all the day?" he asked, "riding about chalking pornograms on the roads?"

"Worse. I have been making myself eligible for the Black Spot."

"The Black Spot? Oh, yes; the Black Spot; that's still going, is it? I'm glad. Stevens II. is a natural leader. You get one every ten years or so in a school, and every hundred years in a country, if you're lucky. What happens to all the others I don't know. Go into an office, or get ruined at their public school, I suppose. But, I say, what are you doing in that gallery?"

"We of the Black Spot do not betray our secrets. But I've been mopping up information to-day. To-day, in fact, may be described as the beginning of the end, the thin end of the wedge, or what you will."

"You mean, you're on to the criminal?" said Michael excitedly; "do we cease to be under suspicion?"

"You never were, as far as I'm concerned. But I'm afraid the superintendent is still unconvinced. Of course, he's felt different towards you since that joy-ride after the late James Urquhart—one can't share that sort of experience with a person without it affecting one's attitude towards him, but what facts Armstrong has point to you and Hero; it's only because they've so few of them that he doesn't arrest you."

The strained look that had been in Michael's eyes for several days returned to them. "Well, I did think the worst was over. It seems I've just been creating a sort of fool's paradise," he said bitterly. "I'm sorry. That sounds ungrateful. Tell me what you've found out to-day."

"Can I have some tea first?"

"Haven't you had it yet?"

"Yes. I want some more."

"Oh, God, I wish you'd take to a hypodermic syringe instead. It would save a lot of trouble."

While his friend boiled water and got out the tea, Nigel gave a series of extracts from the information he had collected, omitting the conversation in the wood. Michael was amazed that he had not seen before the connection between Wemyss' disappearance and the confiscated Black Spot instructions.

"And now to business," said Nigel, peering anxiously into the depleted pot. "I want to ask you some questions. We'll get over the most embarrassing ones first."

"Shoot, Mister. We are never embarrassed."

"How did you and Hero arrange your meetings? Word of mouth?"

"Sometimes. But lately she took to putting notes behind a loose brick in the garden wall. Romantic."

"Did you ever miss any of them?"

"No—not as far as I know."

"Mm. You probably wouldn't. Where did you two meet? I mean, wasn't it frightfully dangerous?"

"Frightfully. But, you see, one gets so reckless. It was because we really half wanted to be found out and bring things to a crisis, I suppose. We met once or twice in the thicket early this term—the affair only started then—but that was going it a bit too much even for Hero; after that, it was generally somewhere out in the country. We never went to each other's rooms."

"And as far as you know, you were never seen?"

"We couldn't have been. The balloon would have gone up long ago, otherwise. Every one in the country round about knows Hero by sight; and nearer home, well—schoolmasters are about on a level with parsons where scandal is concerned. You can't conceive what the gossip of a

Common Room is like. I suppose it's because we were so reckless that we never were found out—like chaps in the War who wanted to be killed and never got a scratch."

"This meeting in the haystack—how was it arranged?"

"A note in the garden wall. Hero put it there after dinner the night before, actually, and I fetched it in the morning. I had the second period off."

"You destroyed it, presumably."

"Oh, yes. What is the point of all this, by the way?"

"I can't tell you yet. But it's very satisfactory so far. You know, what worried me all along is why the murderer chose such an odd place to stage his act." Nigel cocked an inquisitive eye at his friend. Michael looked puzzled. "Well?" "Well to you," said Nigel. "You have all the facts. It'll give you something to think about."

"The mantle of Holmes sits very ill upon you, I may say," remarked Michael acidly.

"And now," said Nigel, waving off this unseemly petulance, "we come to our second head. I want you to try to remember everything that was done or said in your presence by any of the masters on the day of the sports. We'll take the rest of the week later."

"Look here. What do you think I am? A dictaphone?"

"Not so accurate, unfortunately. But we'll have to make the best of it."

It turned out to be a less superhuman task than Michael had feared. Stimulated by his friend's skilful questioning, he reconstructed that ill-starred day piece by piece. The conversations at breakfast, during recess, after lunch on the field, and later, in the Common Room; the remarks of Sims and Wrench beside the haystack—practically nothing was missed, however irrelevant it seemed. From this, Nigel led him through the succeeding days; he seemed particularly interested in the atmosphere that had prevailed in the Common Room, and took the greatest pains to get clear the details of the scene between Gadsby and Wrench. When it was all finished, he leant back for a moment with his eyes closed. Then, "Tiverton seems to have brains," he said, half to himself; "spotted the key point of the problem at once. That pencil of yours—I wonder." Then he opened his eyes; Michael was astonished to see something very like fear in them. "You know, I don't like this at all. This murderer of yours is worse than clever; he's—oh, well——"

"Do you mean—you know who the murderer is?" asked Michael, feeling a flutter of apprehension in his heart.

"Yes," said Nigel gravely. "I think I know who the murderer is. But I doubt if I can ever prove it. A question of proof—that's a good title for a detective story, if you ever write one—and I've not got enough proof to fill an acorn. One wouldn't mind so much if there wasn't the danger that he——" Nigel broke off and shook himself. "Your Mr. Gadsby seems an efficient broadcaster. Would you mind telling him—at once, and in strict confidence—that you are under the gravest suspicion of this crime."

"Gadsby is far from accustomed to being the recipient of my maiden confidences."

"Never mind. He's not nearly critical enough to notice that. Run along, old boy, and pull your stuff. It will be safer for you to be published abroad as a prime suspect, just at present."

" 'Safer'?"

" 'Safer' was the word."

It is five minutes to eight—five minutes before that rather grisly cold supper which is the sole social contact between the Rev. Mr. Vale and his staff. Michael has spilled the beans to Gadsby, who is even now distributing them (in the strictest confidence) to his colleagues. Michael hastens into the drawing-room, hoping to have Hero alone for a few minutes before the others come in.

She was there, waiting for him; her body, in its black dress, moved subtly as the wind; the incredible fairy gold of her hair glimmered through the twilight, and her living arms stretched out to him. The sun, hurrying to its rest, stood still while they kissed.

"Hero, my sweet love. You are so beautiful. You are the spring of water and the blossom in the wilderness. My dear, I can't live without you any longer."

She bent her head back from him, her body sweetly curving. The electric storms of love passed through them and they kissed again. Her mouth was lovely from his kiss; she gazed at him, her eyes bewildered with love. Then she caught her breath—a little sob like a wind dying among pine-tops, and her mouth drooped like a bough when the wind has died. "Oh, Michael, I can't," she sighed. "I love you so much. I would give all my mind and body to save you from a minute's pain or sadness. Yet I can't. They're not all mine to give. Michael, you must try to understand me. And don't be angry with me now—afterwards, if you like; but not now. I think I should die if you were. Promise not to be angry with me."

"I promise." Michael heard his voice coming as it were from a great distance, a great height or depth of tenderness.

"Michael, you are so good. Listen. These things that have happened have made me different. I love you infinitely more than I did before, but —I would have left Percy then with scarcely a thought, and now I cannot. Oh, my sweet, don't look as if I'd hit you. I feel towards you now as I never felt before, and that's why I have begun to feel the ties between myself and Percy too. You see—I just can't help myself—a part of me is bound to him and I can't get it away."

"You want me not to tell him, then?"

"Not yet. While he's in trouble I am not free—not all of me. And when I come to you, it must be for ever and it must be all of me."

There was a deep and melancholy acquiescence in Michael's words. "Yes, Hero, you are right. And will you ever be really free, now, all of you, till—he is dead?"

"Oh, my heart's darling, I don't know—I don't know." The wild despair of her voice made Michael forget his own pain. He was going to kiss her, for the last time perhaps, when they heard voices in the passage.

"Hullo, superintendent, you still here? Hard at it? Nose down to the trail?" came Gadsby's hearty tones.

"Poking about, sir, just poking about."

Mr. and Mrs. Vale, Nigel Strangeways and the staff are sitting round the supper-table. Gadsby, on a glass of insipid Graves plus something a good deal more potent laid in beforehand, is fancying himself the life and soul of the party. Nigel glances at Hero and almost cries out in amazement. There is an unearthly brooding light in her face, an expression of final sorrow almost intolerable to behold. He looks towards Michael; his face, too, bears the same unutterable sadness; it seems cut from rock, Nigel thinks, a rock at the edge of the world with the sunlight of the world's last evening dying upon it. His winged fancy was brought down stone dead by a particularly uproarious explosion of laughter from Gadsby, heralding the conclusion of one of his own jokes, ". . . and she said, 'but that's not my ticket—it's my sister's,' ha! ha! ha! It was her sister's, you see." A faint echo of Gadsby's hilarity went round the table. He showed his teeth all round, like a prima donna acknowledging an ovation; then, tuning his voice to a suitable minor key, remarked: "Well, headmaster, I suppose we shall have to give the parents' match a miss this year—er—after what has happened." Vale took a sip of water—the gesture was a dignified rebuke in itself—before replying.

"On the contrary, Mr. Gadsby. I have given the matter serious thought, and decided that it would not be in the interests of the school to forgo the fixture. Mrs. Vale entirely agrees with me, and since we were the nearest relatives of the unfortunate lad—in short, the match will take place on Tuesday, as originally arranged."

Sims rubbed his hands. "Good! Excellent! I'm sure you're right, headmaster. It is such a popular event, both with the boys and their parents. It would be a thousand pities to miss it."

Mr. Vale inclined his head in gracious acceptance of his subordinate's approval, took another sip of water, and gave a short, dry cough.

"If you will be so good, Mr. Tiverton, as to supervise Strang's men when they come to put up the marquee to-morrow. I have already informed the firm." Vale was one of those men who must always be standing over their work-people, either in person or by proxy. He proceeded on his stately way: "I have sent out invitations, and Major Fairweather has consented to select and lead the father's team."

"What's the idea of the marquee?" came an audible whisper from Wrench.

"Tea," said Michael.

Mr. Vale fastened a frosty eye upon the interrupter. "Our own eleven is doubtless decided upon, Mr. Griffin?"

"Yes," replied the games-master, adding in a low, rumbling aside to Michael, "and if that old fool Fairweather potters about at the wicket for more than five minutes, I shall tell Stevens to adopt bodyline tactics."

Chapter X

ANNIHILATION OF A SCHOOLMASTER

The next morning, Monday, at exactly seven-eighteen o'clock, Nigel Strangeways came wide awake, with the word "haystack" on his tongue. He sat up in bed, under a mountain of blankets and eiderdowns, and reviewed the problem. Yes, his instinct had been right: the haystack was the nub and centre of the mystery. As Armstrong had said, it was too much of a coincidence altogether; either Michael and Hero had committed the murder, or the murder has been committed there to incriminate them; therefore, by elimination—— He was pretty sure, too, of the murderer's motive in seeking to incriminate them, and thence, by psychological elimination, of the murderer. But that seemed to be a dead stop. The motive he suspected would not impress the superintendent, and any able barrister could laugh it out of court in half a minute. Yet something must be done; one simply couldn't have a murderer about the place; one had no particular liking for the legalised revenges of justice, it was simply that one preferred not to have a murderer walking around—so many temptations for the poor fellow. He might, of course, having erupted to his own satisfaction, become extinct; but volcanoes, fondly imagined to be extinct, have a nasty way of bursting out again, just when the local inhabitants have begun to feel thoroughly secure. No, proof one must have—visible, tangible, matter-of-fact proof; and that was the kind of proof which he despaired ever of getting. The haystack. Had he, so to speak, sucked it dry? If one can suck a straw, one could presumably, given time, suck a haystack. Leaving that academic point aside, however, had the haystack any more secrets to yield? All very well to say it was used to incriminate Hero and Michael. But surely a murderer of such unpleasant ability could have found safer means of incriminating them. After all, it was he who had to do the murder. Why choose such a public place? And when, *when* had he done it? There must be some logical connection between time and place. Nigel lit a cigarette and went over Michael's account of the Sports Day, detail by detail. Suddenly he threw his head up, extinguished his cigarette disastrously upon the topmost eiderdown and exclaimed, "Good God! Yes. Yes. It must be. Well, I'll be damned!"

After breakfast Nigel set himself to clearing the ground. There were a number of loose ends still lying about, and he felt that no advance could be made till they were out of the way. He went first to Mrs. Vale.

"Things are beginning to move," he said, in answer to her unspoken question. "I just want three things—a request and two questions. The request is this: will you tell any one who happens to ask you that Michael is under strong police suspicion."

"But surely he isn't still, is he?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. So are you. But it shouldn't last much longer. Were any of the staff intimate with Urquhart?"

"They all knew him—Tiverton best, I think. But he made a habit of inviting each master to dinner at least once a year."

"What about Wrench?"

"He had dinner with James last month. James used to invite new masters their first term."

"Third, can you tell me what your husband was doing all the time he said he was changing?"

Hero gave him a quizzical look, and seemed to be debating in her mind. "Is it absolutely necessary for you to know? Percy'll probably divorce me if I tell you."

"I do want to know very much. As long as he wasn't committing murder or anything, I'll see it's not made public."

"Very well, then, he was changing."

"What? What?" stuttered Nigel, quite flabbergasted.

"Changing. Trying on different suits and things, and studying the effect in the glass. The parents were coming, you see. He doesn't know I know it, of course, but, well, I suppose every one has to have a vice, and vanity is Percy's."

Nigel thanked her and walked away, meditating the curiosities of human nature, particularly as exhibited by the Rev. Percival Vale. He routed out Stevens II. and gave him certain instructions. His next port of call was Griffin. He asked him to come out in the field, and there they reconstructed Griffin's movements between one-forty-five and two-thirty on the day of the crime. They were in the middle of this when the games-master suddenly bellowed out, "Hi, what the dickens are you doing over there, Stevens? Don't you know you're not allowed out now?" He was beginning to make tracks towards the offender, when Nigel laid a restraining hand upon him.

"It's all right. I told him to. I wanted to see if the murderer could have got to the haystack without attracting your attention. If Stevens couldn't do it, I bet the murderer couldn't."

As they re-entered the buildings a small and dirty hand tugged at Nigel's sleeve. It was Ponsonby. The boy drew him aside and muttered darkly:

"Promise you won't tell any one, not even the dictator."

"Yes."

"Well, he knows who the murderer is—at least, he said he did, but he won't tell even me. S'pose he thinks he can track him down by himself." The mutinous lieutenant took himself off, not without several sinister glances over his shoulder at Nigel.

There was probably nothing in it, Nigel reflected; one couldn't hope for all that luck, but stones, however small, cannot be left unturned by the detective, so he went after Stevens again. A certain amount of tact had to be employed in order not to betray Ponsonby, but the information was obtained without much difficulty. Stevens II. had not wanted to sneak on what the superintendent had called a "playmate," even to his friend, the great detective. "But," he said, "I've got my suspicions about that oaf, Smithers. You see, at breakfast that day, apparently Wemyss had been ragging him. Every one does, of course. Anyway, I heard Smithers say to him in recess, 'I'll kill you.' He looked jolly bloodthirsty too, sir. And he's been awfully funny lately—since the murder, I mean. I suppose I ought to have told you before, but it didn't seem fair, somehow, though Smithers is such an oick."

Nigel reassured him and made a mental note to interview the underbred Smithers in recess. The bell for first period now rang. Nigel strolled into the Common Room, where Tiverton was sitting with a pile of exercise books before him. He had this hour off. "I hope I'm not interrupting," said Nigel.

"Not a bit. I can do this any time. I say, is it true that the police suspect Evans still?"

"I'm afraid so. In fact, he's in a very awkward position. That pencil, you know——" Nigel added.

"But I thought that was disposed of. He told us he'd lost it during the hay battle."

"Yes. But the superintendent seems to have got an idea that he had it the next day—the day of the murder."

"Well, I must admit I thought myself I'd seen him using it that morning. I say, good Lord, I hope I haven't been making things difficult for him. No, it couldn't be. There were only Griffin and Evans himself in the room then."

Nigel gave him an inquiring look.

"When I happened to mention that I thought I'd seen him using the pencil on the day after the hay battle," explained Tiverton.

There was a little desultory conversation, then Nigel strolled out and made for the telephone in the private side of the house. He rang up the Staverton police station.

"Is that Superintendent Armstrong. . . . Oh, right, I'll hold the line. . . . Morning, Armstrong—this is Strangeways. Sorry to bother you. Would you mind telling me again about Evans' pencil that you found in the haystack? His finger-prints only? Mm. On the ground, you said, didn't you? Said he must have dropped it during the hay battle? Well, why not? . . . Yes, exactly, no proof to the contrary? . . . Very awkward for you, as you say. I take it no one but the police and his friends know about it? . . . By the way, are you coming up to-day? . . . This afternoon? Good. Yes, I may have something for you. Oh, I forgot to tell you—I know who the murderer is. Au revoir, then."

Nigel rang off, leaving the superintendent dancing with rage and baffled curiosity at the other end of the telephone. Sims' class-room, as Nigel entered it, presented an unusually orderly aspect; it may be that the repercussions of the headmaster's last visit had not yet died away, or perhaps Nigel's tacit disapproval of their treatment of the little man had percolated through Stevens II. and Ponsonby to the rest. These two young gentlemen were sitting, for them, quite still, and when the form rose to their feet at Nigel's entry, they returned their fellow conspirator's glance with an expression so excessively wooden as to have aroused the deepest suspicions in any unbiased observer. Nigel advanced to the master's desk, peered vaguely at the books lying upon it. Sims made a fidgeting gesture towards the books. Nigel asked if he could have a word with Sims outside. The door was, fortunately, fairly thick, so neither of them heard a hissing stage-whisper from Ponsonby, "I say, he's going to arrest old Simmie," and another from Stevens II., "Go down the next street! He hadn't got any handcuffs—they'd bulge in his pocket."

"Terribly sorry to interrupt you like this, but it's rather urgent. The police, perhaps you've heard, have got some ridiculous idea that Evans is mixed up with this murder. We've got to clear him soon or they may take action. That pencil of his is the difficulty, of course."

Sims looked puzzled. "Pencil?"

"Oh, yes; didn't you know? They found his silver pencil in the haystack. Actually he dropped it there ragging about on the day before, but he can't prove that, you see. I suppose you didn't notice whether he had it on the morning of the murder, did you?"

"No. I couldn't be sure—that is. I didn't see him using it, as far as I remember. But I'm afraid that's not much use."

"Well, it can't be helped. Thanks."

Nigel wandered off again and read the papers in the Common Room. The Sudeley Hall murder occupied no space in them now; for two or three days their editors had announced that the police were making progress and shown the conventional optimism about an imminent arrest; the adjourned inquest had been reported, and there had been accounts in one or two papers of the boy's funeral, pulsating with that ghoulish sentimentality for which editors have coined the phrase "human interest." Even the echoes of the belabouring of that very dead donkey—police inefficiency—had died away. And what, after all, reflected Nigel, could Armstrong do? Police investigation lives by facts alone, and quite right too; facts are sometimes misleading, but at least they are safer than amateur psychological theorising or confessions induced by rubber truncheons and dentists' drills. The superintendent had interviewed every one who could possibly be concerned, and he was clever enough to deal with any ordinary murder. But this was no ordinary murder; which accounted, amongst other things, for the dearth of facts, of material clues.

When the bell rang for recess, Nigel went out into the yard and inquired for Smithers. He was pointed out a yelling ring of boys. They were engaged in a local form of bear-baiting known as "chub-chub"; this consisted of darting in at the victim, giving his cheek a violent tug, and melting again into the crowd of the oppressors. The victim, needless to say, was Smithers. He was red in the face and his eyes were strained with pain and humiliation; he backed slowly away from his tormentors, swinging wildly at them with the flat of his hands—he had once hit some one with a fist, and had not been allowed to forget such a violation of the code of sportsmanship. As he backed, malicious feet swung at him from behind and pushed him into the middle of the ring again. Nigel approached the group. He was glad to see that Stevens II. and Ponsonby were not among them. He felt furiously angry. The boys stopped and stood sheepishly when they saw him. He whipped them soundly with his tongue for a minute—Nigel could be devastating when he wished. He made more impression than he realised at the time, for he knew the insensitiveness to rebuke of boys in the mass. Several masters had from time to time given tongue publicly on the subject of the bullying of

Smithers, but it had had little effect; the boys knew that one must expect that sort of thing from masters, it was what they were paid for. But this intervention of a disinterested party, so to speak, and the heroic detective at that, was a different matter. It gave them a shock; and life was much easier for Smithers from that moment.

If Nigel had made an impression on these tough eggs, Smithers' tormentors, the effect of his action on Smithers himself was enormous. The boy was a little dazed at first by the sudden relief; a little suspicious, too, as a trapped animal is suspicious of its rescuer. But soon enough, to continue the metaphor, he was ready to eat out of his hand. He found himself walking towards the field at the side of this kind and godlike man, a man who was talking to him as no one seemed to have talked to him for years. Nigel was wiser than to make any reference to the scene which had just taken place or to the dead Wemyss. This boy was no murderer, and anything he had to say could well wait for a few hours, till he had calmed down a bit inside. So he was content to draw the boy out about his home and his interests; it was easy enough, because Smithers turned out to be an authority on the beasts and birds of the countryside, and Nigel never had need to pretend interest in any subject of which he was ignorant. They had been talking for nearly a quarter of an hour when there was a pause and the boy gave him a look which he could not quite fathom; he imagined, however, that Smithers was going to try to express his gratitude, so he said quickly:

"Don't you bother about that. Come and have tea with me—to-day or to-morrow—I'll tell you later. And, of course, if ever there's anything particular you want to talk about, I'm always here."

Smithers opened his mouth, but the bell rang for school, and Nigel was spared any display of gratitude which may have been coming to him. He had scarcely got indoors again when he received a message—Superintendent Armstrong was in the morning-room and would like to see him. Nigel smiled ruefully. Armstrong certainly did not let the grass grow under his feet. He had been a fool, indulging in that piece of rodomontade over the telephone. And the superintendent soon let him know it.

"Now, sir, what's all this about your knowing who the murderer is?" Nigel was a little nettled by the aggressive manner of the question.

"Just that," he said, "but it's not for publication yet."

"Come, come, Mr. Strangeways. My time is valuable. I take it this is not a practical joke. If you have proof about the murderer, I must ask you to hand it over to me at once."

"I never said I had proof. I said I knew who the murderer was. You have all the facts in your possession that I have. We agreed not to bother each other with theories until either of us had a fairly watertight case."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, sir. You say you know who did the murder, but have no proofs. It sounds silly to me."

"Not the sort of proofs that would satisfy you; or a court of law," added Nigel hastily. "I've not found an eye-witness, or a signed confession or any hot news like that. My clues are of the invisible, intangible sort."

"Oh Lord," snorted the superintendent, "what they call psychological induction: or have you been consulting a medium?"

Nigel grinned patiently. "No, I've been talking to one of your suspects —by the way, Mr. Evans is not the murderer; I'll give you the significant extracts and you can go home and chew on them."

He proceeded to relate some of Michael's reminiscences and certain conversations at which he himself had been present. As these have all been recorded already, there is no need to repeat them. When he had finished, Armstrong remarked irritably:

"Well, really, sir, if I didn't know of your reputation, I should be inclined to say——"

"Don't say it! Let us rise above personal abuse."

"And you don't propose to tell me the name of this"—the superintendent choked—"this psychic suspect of yours?"

"No. Not at present. What'd be the use? You go the high road and I'll go the low road—and I'll see you in Scotland if you ever get there."

"I'll see you in——" remarked the superintendent with the beginnings of a grin.

"Now, now! No recriminations! But, seriously, give me another day. Come up to-morrow afternoon, there's going to be an exciting cricket match; either I'll have something more solid for you by then, or I'll give you my theory, for what it's worth."

Armstrong had to be content with this. But he felt vexed; what on earth did Strangeways see in those conversations that he couldn't? And to discharge some of this vexation he proceeded to take the high road with a vengeance, as was testified in the course of the day by the faces of Hero and Michael, Wrench and Rosa—those oddly juxtaposed pairs of lovers. But their stories remained unshaken. The high road didn't seem to lead anywhere.

"It's a gesture, certainly, but pretty safe from Percy's point of view," Michael replied. It was Tuesday afternoon. He and Nigel were sauntering out onto the field, where already a few fathers were getting their eyes in at the nets. "After all," he continued, "the Business-As-Usual slogan gets the British middle-class where they live—it has just the right combination of backs-to-the-wall bulldog courage and commercial *savoir-faire.* In this case it will leave its only rival—the respect-for-the-dead ballyhoo—at the post. Those parents who are shortly going to take the field will get quite a kick out of feeling that they are Carrying On; just like the old days—the General Strike and the Great War. I Gave my Sons and Kept the Home Fires Burning, only in this case it's Percy giving his nephew. Thank God the boys don't think like that. Two teams demonstrating the middle-class's capacity for Carrying On would be more than I could bear." Michael was trembling all over, as he always did when engaged in controversial statement.

"You take things too much to heart," said Nigel lightly. "Admittedly most of this Business-As-Usual stuff is hypocrisy. But a certain amount of hypocrisy is necessary to oil the wheels of society. Very few people have either the ability or the training to understand their own motives—and a good thing too. γνῶθ ισεαυτον is very well for the philosopher, but it's no use for the practical man; he'd never get anything done if he appreciated his motives for action. Only a great man can be a consistent protestant, and the rest of us must have our external sanctions—slogans if you like—and live under authority. It seems to me the real job of you schoolmasters is to train boys in the choosing of the best slogans to obey."

"And if I did, I should be chucked out of here soon enough. The best slogans I know are the ones in the Sermon on the Mount and 'to each according to his need, from each according to his ability.' As a matter of fact I shall probably be in prison before I have time to do any proselytising. That blasted superintendent put me through the hoops again yesterday. Oh, there he is. I wish he'd get out the handcuffs and have done with it."

Armstrong came up and greeted them; Michael impassively, and Nigel with ill-concealed impatience.

"Not till after the match," remarked Nigel in answer to his unspoken appeal; "don't let's mix up business and pleasure. The murderer can't get away." He glanced significantly to where the plain-clothes constable lounged near the gate, a substantial skeleton-at-the-feast.

They strolled once or twice round the boundary line. The boys were taking their places on benches or the grass on the far side of the field. On the other side, between the school building and the boundary line, were deck chairs for the more privileged spectators, with the tea tent immediately behind them. On the right-hand side of the field, looking from the school, was the pavilion, the nets beyond it. Michael could see Major Fairweather tossing up with Anstruther; it was evident, from the jocular backslappings which followed, that the fathers had won. Nigel invited the superintendent to occupy one of the benches with him; he wanted to watch the cricket and not to have his attention distracted by the restlessness and amateur comment of proud mothers. Michael hurried across to the other side of the ground; of two evils he would prefer hobnobbing with the parents to hobnobbing with the superintendent; also, Hero was there. She was sitting beside the headmaster, and gave Michael a sad, caressing look as he approached. Then some parents came up to her, and Michael set himself to be sociable.

The umpires came out; Griffin with his rolling gait, and Tiverton looking trim and professional. They were followed by a lanky bespectacled parent, and the Vicar of Sudeley, an old Cambridge blue. There was a tradition handed down among parents of the better sort that in this match one did not make more than twenty-five, and made it as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, there always seemed to be one or two parents more interested in their average than in tradition and a jolly game. A sensible captain generally ran these out, or told some one else to. But Major Fairweather was not this type of captain. Michael felt uneasy. And his uneasiness was justified when the innings were brought to a close, but the fathers had scored two hundred and three. The boys straggled in to tea, looking disconsolate.

Events after tea seemed at first to justify their worst forebodings. Griffin was still umpiring at one end, but Tiverton had been relieved by one of the parents. Off the second ball, Major Fairweather at square leg held a low, hard catch—a shot which any right-thinking father would have allowed to pass to the boundary. Stevens I., the other opening batsman, overawed by this reverse, allowed himself to be bowled shortly after by a rank bad ball. Then the score crept up and up; one hundred and twenty-one for four; one hundred and fifty for five; one hundred and fifty-eight for six; one hundred and seventy for seven; one hundred and eighty-four for eight; one hundred and ninety-four for nine. The fathers were all on their toes now; they meant to win.

The spectators ceased to be bored or mildly interested. Every ball was preceded by nervous suspense and followed with signs of relief or wild applause. "That's the idee! That's the idee!" yelled the school—a catchword of the moment—as each run was scored. Even the little boys, who had spent most of the match tumbling over each other on the boundary, stopped their antics and mingled their batlike shrieks in the applause. It was a regular school-story finish; the sort of finish that does, as a matter of fact, occur quite frequently in prep-school matches.

Chapter XI

"I HAVE THEE NOT . . ."

"This is going to be a good finish, Hero," said Mr. Vale.

"Yes, it's frightfully exciting, isn't it."

Hero leant forward. The first ball of a new over. Giffard could never do it. She saw the ball miss stumps and wicket-keeper, and long legs tearing round to cut it off from the boundary. Anstruther turned and leapt forward for the third run. "He'll never do it," she cried. There was a grunt from her husband. Anstruther got home. "Hooray, he's done it." Hero turned to Vale, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Isn't it——? Wake up, Percy! Are you feeling ill?" She shook him. As he slumped slowly sideways, and on to the ground, she saw a tiny hole, a tiny ooze of blood through the coat on his back. It was too much. Hero moaned and fainted away.

Michael heard that little moan. It almost broke his heart. He ran to Hero and laid her on the ground and took her head on his lap. A crowd gathered round. Tiverton and Sims were bending over the headmaster. Wrench, pale as death, stood a little aside. The superintendent and Nigel came pounding across the field, scattering the players. "She's fainted. Run and get her some water!" somebody said. Michael was off like a flash, making for the school; he heard, as in a dream, an angry shout from the superintendent, ordering him to stop. It would have taken an electrified fence to stop him. Armstrong shouldered his way through the throng, gave one look at the body, and shouted for the plain-clothes man. He ordered him to ring up first Dr. Maddox and then the police headquarters at Staverton. While he was giving directions his eyes were not on his subordinate; they wandered vigilantly from side to side of the field. "No one passed into the school just now, Jones?"

"Only Mr. Evans, sir. Said he was getting water for Mrs. Vale, so I let him pass."

"All right. Off you go! Mr. Strangeways, will you please stand at the school gate and allow no one to pass in on any pretext whatsoever. You there, Mr. Griffin? Right. I want you to station yourself at the end of the path leading to the wood. If any one tries to get away through the wood or over the hayfield, jump on him." The superintendent posted two of the most stalwart parents, who had been taking part in the match, at other strategic points. He was now certain that no one could leave the field, and he was pretty certain that no one but Evans had left it since the murder. Armstrong next turned to the bystanders and began shouting an order. But there was a hum of conversation around, and a number of people were standing at some distance out of earshot. "I'll get the megaphone," said Wrench, and walked quickly over towards the pavilion. Armstrong had raised his hand, then dropped it; but he followed Wrench with his eyes till he saw him emerge from the pavilion carrying the megaphone and start walking back. Meanwhile Evans had arrived with a tumbler of water. Hero's clothing had been loosened and she had been made more comfortable. Michael propped her head up, sprinkled water on her forehead, and as she rose up into consciousness again, held the glass to her lips. Armstrong gave him a searching look, then he raised the megaphone and bellowed: "Ladies and gentlemen, no one is to leave the field. Mr. Vale has met with an accident, and the doctor has been sent for. Mr. Tiverton there? I want all the boys collected by those benches on the far side and kept there. Will those gentlemen who were playing in the match stay just outside the pavilion." He lowered the megaphone and addressed the parents and masters standing nearby. "Will you gentlemen move these chairs further away; the ladies can sit down; we shall have some time to wait. No one must go near Mr. Vale."

The plain-clothes man returned and reported that the doctor and the police reinforcements were on their way. Armstrong sent him to relieve Strangeways at the gate, and when the latter returned began questioning those who stood nearest. "Did any of you see what happened? Which of you were closest to Mr. Vale when the—er—accident occurred?" Sims, Wrench and Gadsby stepped forward. Sims, it appeared, had been standing a yard or so to the right of the headmaster's chair, behind it; Wrench and Gadsby behind it to the left. Gadsby said that Tiverton had passed a remark with him about half a minute before Mrs. Vale fainted and had then moved away. The visitors sitting on the chairs on either side of Mr. and Mrs. Vale had not moved during the fatal minute. Indeed, from the moment the bowler had begun his run for the first ball of that last over till Mrs. Vale had fainted, no one had had eyes for anything but the game. "And you, Mr. Evans?" Armstrong repeated the question rather sharply. Michael, who had turned Hero's chair with its back to the huddled body on the ground and lifted her gently into it, was stroking her hand, oblivious to the crowd's gaze and the superintendent's words.

He looked up vaguely, jerked his hand over his shoulder, and said, "Me? I was standing over there."

"Come, sir, please be a little more explicit."

"Over there, I tell you. Near Sims."

"That's right, superintendent. He was standing beside me at the end of the last over," said Sims, gratified at his brief moment in the limelight.

"And then?"

"Then? Oh, I see. W-well, I m-mean I didn't n-n-notice anything once the over b-began," stuttered Sims.

Armstrong motioned the bystanders, whose curiosity had led them to draw nearer the protagonists, to move back. He then approached Mrs. Vale. She looked up at him, horror still close beneath the surface of her eyes.

"Now, madam, I'm very sorry to have to trouble you just now. But you realise that the sooner I get all the facts, the quicker we shall find your husband's—murderer." He raised his voice slightly on the last word and glanced keenly about him. The faces were rigid and white, immobile with shock. Like a breeze rippling over a field of corn and dying at its farthest limit, the word "murder" rustled through the crowd, causing a visible tremor in its mass, and communicating itself even to those who waited on the other side of the ground.

Hero moistened her bloodless lips. "I don't know. He spoke to me just before the over began. And when we had won the match I turned to him again. I thought he'd gone to sleep. So I shook him, and he fell off the seat, and I saw——" Her voice shuddered and broke.

"Are you quite certain you heard or saw nothing else? I'm sorry, Mrs. Vale, but I must ask you this. Nothing, however unimportant?"

"When they were running I said, 'He'll never do it' or something, and my husband gave a sort of grunt—answering me. Oh, God, he wasn't answering me. He was——" Hero had been speaking in a tense whisper, but such was the concentrated silence of the onlookers that every word reached them. Hero's body straightened, then collapsed into the arms of Michael standing beside her chair. He held her there, tight, stroking her golden hair.

Armstrong raised the megaphone to his lips and shouted: "If any one saw anything unusual happening here after the beginning of the last over, will he kindly report it to me at once." Again the crowd stirred and heaved uneasily, but no one stepped forward. "Did any of you touch the body before we came over?" Nigel asked of the group standing nearest. There was a brief silence, then Sims volunteered: "Tiverton and I turned him—it—over, to see if——" his voice trailed away. "And who reached it first?" "Tiverton. I was j-just behind him." The superintendent broke in brusquely. "And why did you or he remove the weapon? Don't you know that you should never——" "Oh, but we didn't. Really, we didn't. I mean to say, there was no weapon there," interrupted Sims, looking bewildered. The superintendent gave Nigel an enigmatic look, then he turned to Evans and said, "Would you mind asking Mrs. Vale whether there was a weapon in the body when she saw it fall to the ground." Nigel reflected that, though Armstrong was putting up a show of tact and consideration, he seemed to be listening very carefully to the whispered colloquy between Michael and Hero.

"She says she is certain there was no weapon," Michael finally informed the superintendent, then, with a spurt of indignation, he added, "If you've finished your badgering, perhaps you'll let her go indoors where these human sheep can't stare at her any longer."

"No one may leave the field till he has been searched. You can take her into the tent there, if you like."

Michael carried Hero into the tent, in full view of two hundred eyes. He could see nothing but her desperate tears, hear nothing but the sobbing of her breath. The tent was empty; the tea had been cleared half an hour ago. Hero clung to Michael like a child; over her shoulder he could see a section of the crowd, waiting, white and silent; he could not see the superintendent, who was standing close to the outside wall of the tent—listening.

Whatever Armstrong may have hoped to hear, he was not given much time for listening. Dr. Maddox arrived, his jaunty walk sobered to the occasion. He nodded to Armstrong and bent over the remains of Percival Vale. "Dead, of course. Instantaneous. Can he be moved?" "Yes; it can't make any difference. Will some of you gentlemen help me to carry him behind the tent."

The remains of Percival Vale were taken up and put down again. Dr. Maddox bent over the body. After a minute or two he stood up and brushed his knees. "Well, sir?" said Armstrong eagerly.

"He was stabbed. Some very thin weapon, like a stiletto, for instance. The point entered the body below the left shoulder blade and pierced the heart. I should say it was delivered a little from the left; the post-mortem will verify that. Death, as I say, was instantaneous. There was practically no bleeding."

Nigel glanced at the superintendent. It was easy to imagine which way his thoughts were tending. Hero had been sitting on the left of her husband. He strolled round and inspected the chair on which Vale had been sitting; the canvas was pierced at the back, just below the bar. A group of masters were standing near, speaking in undertones.

"God!" Gadsby was saying, "it's amazing—incredible. Killed in full view of every one. Why, damn it, it's impossible."

"Well, it's been done, anyway," said Wrench. "I guess the murderer's feeling pretty sick, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Sims.

"The police are going to search every one. And presumably he's still got the gory blade concealed amongst his underwear."

"Really, Wrench," protested Gadsby, "this is not the time or place for your rotten cynicism."

"Nor the time or place for a murder," returned Wrench: "damned bad form, I call it—in front of all the parents."

It was not long now before the police from Staverton arrived. Sergeant Pearson, several constables, a police matron, and with them the chief constable, looking flustered and ill at ease. Armstrong went straight up to the latter, saluted and spoke quickly. Nigel edged nearer; he was only able to catch the last words, but these were quite enough:

". . . search warrant for Evans' rooms, sir."

"Are you sure it's absolutely necessary. I mean——"

"It's essential, sir, and the sooner the better."

"Very well, Armstrong."

The superintendent sent constables to relieve the plain-clothes man and the amateur sentries. As the former came over he whispered to him, "Was Mr. Evans carrying anything?"

"Yes, sir, a tumbler of water."

"Don't be a damned fool. When he left the field, I mean."

"Sorry, sir. No, sir, he didn't appear to be."

Armstrong now summoned the sergeant and the police matron. He addressed the latter first: "I want you to search all the women, in that tent. You can start off with Mrs. Vale; she's there already. You're looking for some kind of very thin pointed blade. You will also, in Mrs. Vale's case only, examine the clothing carefully for bloodstains." He turned to the sergeant. "Pearson, your job is to search all the boys and the gentlemen who were playing in the match. You won't find anything but it must be done. Take the visitors' room in the pavilion. I shall do the rest of the men myself." Armstrong moved towards the crowd and bellowed the necessary directions through his megaphone. The crowd began to break up into two streams, the women moving towards the tent and the men over to the pavilion. Many of them were too dazed by the tragedy to protest, but there were a good number who stuck in their heels and made scenes. The chief constable nibbled his moustache uneasily in the background; he foresaw an unpleasant correspondence on his breakfast table to-morrow. Armstrong, however, like a large sheep dog, barked and manoeuvred and threatened to bite, rounding up the recalcitrants and putting them in their place.

A constable was left to picket the actual site of the crime, and Armstrong began his search. "Mr. Evans, please." Michael came into the room in the pavilion and Nigel entered uninvited with him, looking faintly puzzled. "Will you please undress, sir." Michael lifted one eyebrow, but obeyed; a curious use this changing room is being put to, he thought. The superintendent minutely examined each article of clothing as it was removed. His expression at the end of this was far from pleasant. "No bloodstains, after all?" said Nigel mildly. Armstrong glowered at him and paced once or twice across the room. "Just a minute, Mr. Evans," he said, as Michael was about to depart, "you took a long time about that glass of water, didn't you?"

"No longer than I could help."

"Hm. Where did you get it?"

"My bedroom."

"Do you mean to say there's no tap nearer than that?"

"No, there are lots. But not glasses."

"Wouldn't it have been quicker for you to get a glass from the kitchen?"

"I don't think so. It might, perhaps. But I knew there was one in my bedroom; I went there naturally."

"That will be all, then, for the present. I must ask you, though, not to return to your rooms till I give you permission."

Michael looked inquiringly at him; he had no idea what all the fuss was about, which was fortunate for his peace of mind. The moment he went out Armstrong signalled to a policeman and told him not to let Evans leave the field till further orders. Armstrong now began the tedious business of searching the rest of the men. He started with the masters who had been standing near the victim; their clothing, too, was searched for blood as well as for a weapon. Nigel stood unnaturally still during these operations. It was too much to hope for, he thought. God knows what the murderer has done with it, but he's a sight too clever to be found with any traces of the crime on him. And Nigel was right. After what seemed an interminable period, the last person was searched and dismissed. Not an inch of steel, not a drop of blood had been discovered. The police matron entered and informed Armstrong that she had found nothing. "Mrs. Vale?" he said sharply. The woman shook her head. "Very well," said Armstrong, "we can't keep her out here any longer. Will you take her into the house, Miss Gilray, and don't let her out of your sight." Sergeant Pearson came in to report. "Nothing?" said Armstrong. "Take Jones and search Mr. Evans' rooms. Colonel Humphries will give you the warrant; you may find a bloodstained handkerchief or something as well; he must have contrived somehow to keep the blood off his clothes." Nigel raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. He was busy with his own thoughts. Michael and Hero had not done this—that was his major premise—therefore the weapon could not have been taken off the field. The weapon had not been found on anybody, therefore it must have been hidden on the field. They would have to search there in the end, for it would not be found in Michael's rooms, but the delay was intolerable.

He stepped out of the pavilion. The superintendent had given his orders. The boys had been sent in with Griffin. The visitors were straggling off the field in a mute, funeral sort of procession, the fine feathers of the women seeming to droop upon them. The masters had been told not to leave the ground yet; they were collected in a group around Tiverton, upon whose shoulders the responsibility for carrying on the school had presumably fallen. Somewhere in that bleak great building its late lord and master was lying; no longer a scholar, a gentleman, an absolute ruler: only a body with a hole in it.

It was not long before Sergeant Pearson came out. There are few possible hiding-places in the bare rooms of masters. He had ransacked Evans', and there was nothing to be found. The superintendent bit his lip, but he was not beaten yet. He divided up his little force and sent one half to search the school. "The Common Room first, Pearson; when you've done that, let me know and I'll send these gentlemen in there. See that they stay there, too. Then go over the whole blasted building; that weapon can't have vanished. Interview the servants yourself, and find out if any of them saw Mr. Evans after he went in for that glass of water or knew anything at all about the murder. Not much hope of their having seen anything; that infernal tent stands right between the windows and the place where Mr. Vale was sitting. Off you go!"

As Armstrong turned aside to give his own men their orders, Nigel spoke to him in a low voice, "There's always Wrench and the megaphone."

"I've not forgotten that, Mr. Strangeways. Like to help me search the pavilion?" The other men received their instructions and began moving slowly about the field, radiating from the place where the body had lain. It did not look as if a pin could escape them. Nigel and the superintendent crossed the deserted pitch and entered the pavilion. Nigel left the burden and heat of the search to his companion. Armstrong was a thorough man, he reflected; he might jump too quickly to conclusions, but he gave every possibility a good run for its money. After quarter of an hour the pavilion had been turned inside out, and there was nothing to show for it.

"I suppose he couldn't have hidden it here and taken it away again after you'd searched him?" Nigel suggested tentatively.

"Not he. I had a man watching every one as they left the changing-room. They had to move off double quick."

"You think of everything," said Nigel, not without admiration.

At this moment Sergeant Pearson came up. "We've been over the Common Room, sir. No good." Armstrong frowned. "Very well, the school next. I'll come across and help in a minute." Pearson doubled off and Armstrong approached the little group of masters.

"You gentlemen may go in now. But I'm afraid I must ask you all to stay in the Common Room for the present. We've searched that and there only remains the rest of the building to do."

The masters presented a woebegone and shattered appearance. Tiverton's lean, sunburnt face was twitching spasmodically; Evans stood by himself, gazing over towards the school as though he expected any moment to hear another call for help from Hero; Gadsby, Sims and Wrench were clustered together, conversing in jerky undertones; Gadsby's face was mottled; Sims and Wrench looked white and sick.

"S-searched the Common Room?" repeated Sims dully.

"Yes, sir. The weapon must be hidden somewhere. But we've found nothing so far."

Sims moistened his lips and stared uncomprehendingly at the superintendent. "Nothing so far," he repeated. Armstrong thought he was going to collapse, and put a hand under his elbow, saying, "Hold up, sir. This tragedy has been too much of a shock for you. Just you go indoors and I'll send in some whisky for you. Perhaps one of you gentlemen would be so kind as to——"

"There's sure to be a bottle under Gadsby's bed. I'll fetch it down," muttered Wrench.

Gadsby's face became more mottled than ever. "Wrench, you little tick, can't you ever do anything but try to be clever? If you were a gentleman, you'd know that there are occasions when one tries to show a little self-restraint."

Wrench grew red as fire and glared at him furiously. "When you've all finished blackguarding each other, perhaps we might go in," remarked Tiverton in a voice not quite so bored and detached as he tried to make it.

"If you have some whisky, sir, by any chance, I think it would do none of us any harm," said Armstrong smoothly to Gadsby. "I'll fetch it myself."

"You'll find a bottle in the cupboard," said Gadsby.

"Empty," said Wrench.

An hour later. Nigel and the superintendent are sitting in the morning-room. A very stiff tot of whisky indeed is in front of the superintendent. Nigel has somehow conjured up a pot of tea, and as they talk he moves restlessly from one part of the room to another, carrying his cup and saucer with him and putting them down precariously whenever he comes to a halt.

"Well, this fair beats me," groaned Armstrong, clapping his hand to his forehead. "The field, the tent, the pavilion, the path into the school, and the school itself; we've been over the whole ruddy caboodle with a fine tooth comb, and not a smell of that bleeding dagger—nothing even that begins to look like a dagger."

"I have thee not, and yet I see thee still," quoted Nigel, "only we don't see thee."

"Whassat?"

"Poetry. The Bard."

Armstrong beat his clenched fist again and again upon the table. "Am I going batty or am I not? A man is stabbed. Every one and everything within a hundred yards of him is searched—no one could possibly have got away—but, hey presto! the weapon is gone."

Nigel loped over to another corner of the room and balanced his teacup on the edge of a pouffe. "We ought to have found out if any one here is a sword-swallower. He may be coughing it up privily at this very moment."

"Ah, t'chah!"

"Well, produce something better."

"Why, it's as plain as my foot—or should be," the superintendent's feet did certainly obtrude themselves upon one's notice. "Mrs. Vale carries the stiletto in her clothing, waits for a moment when every one's eyes are glued on the game, stabs him in the back. Quite easy from where she was sitting; weapon entered the body rather from the left; it all fits in. Then she gives him a push and pretends to faint. That is the signal preconcerted with Evans. He runs up, cuddles her a bit, and she passes the weapon to him. He puts it inside his coat, goes off for water, and hides it somewhere in the school. Damn it, it must be right. There must be some hiding-place we've missed."

"Blood, old boy, blood. There'd be bound to be some on her clothing or his."

Armstrong lowered an eyelid ponderously. "That's all right, sir. I forgot to tell you, there was so much to do. After you'd gone in with the masters just now I took another squint at the ground by the tent. Two smears of blood on the grass, quite close where Mrs. Vale fainted. One of 'em must have wiped the blade."

"That's certainly a point to you. But, look here, what was the point of Mrs. Vale's pretending to faint? Surely she would want all eyes concentrated on Vale while she transferred the weapon to Evans. Fainting would distract some attention to herself."

"That's true, sir. But there had to be some pretext for Evans' going so close to her."

"And the motive? On your theory Evans murdered Wemyss to prevent his intrigue with Mrs. Vale coming to her husband's ears. That seemed to me thin enough. And now Mrs. Vale murders her husband, although she knows she and Michael are under suspicion of the first crime—what for? To get a separation? She'd only to ask Vale for a divorce, hadn't she? One might conceivably murder a person if that was the only way out, but she hadn't even asked her husband for a divorce yet."

"Can you prove that?"

Nigel was taken rather aback. "Prove it? No. But one of them would have told me if they'd decided to take the step."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't take that as evidence. You see, I happened to be passing the drawing-room door on Sunday evening before supper, and I heard Mr. Evans ask Mrs. Vale whether she would ever be really free of her husband till he was dead. I'm afraid that will sound more convincing in court than something which one of them would have told you."

" 'Happened' is good."

Armstrong shifted in his chair and said stiffly, "This is not a game of cricket; it's a murder investigation. Some one's got to do the dirty work."

"So you're really going to arrest them this time."

"We'll have another look for that weapon to-morrow morning. If we find it, I shall arrest them. If not, I shall ask the chief constable to call in the Yard."

"Yes, you'd certainly have a pretty good case. But just think a minute. A woman might use that sort of weapon. But I ask you, would any one in their senses go and commit a crime in full view of two hundred people, when there were a thousand opportunities for doing it on the quiet, and quite enough brains to think out any number of safer methods if, as you hold, they had enough brains to think out the first murder."

"Hmph. It took some brains to get rid of the weapon like that. It seems to me there's a remarkable similarity between the two murders. In each case the criminals deliberately put themselves under suspicion, first by admitting that they were in the haystack and then by being in the obvious proximity to Mr. Vale when he is murdered, and in each case they arrange it so that there shall be no proof. I tell you, sir, it's a double bluff. And damned clever too. Surely you're not suggesting that there's no connection between the two murders?"

"Far from it. I suggest that there's even more connection than meets your eagle eye. Hasn't it occurred to you that there's at least just as much likelihood of the murders having been done like this by *somebody else* in order to incriminate Evans and Mrs. Vale as of having been done by them so as to incriminate themselves?"

Armstrong started and fingered his top button uneasily.

"And secondly," pursued Nigel, "doesn't the highly *public* nature of both crimes suggest anything to you?"

Armstrong looked puzzled. "I don't see what you mean. This last crime was public enough. But the murder of Wemyss? Well, the haystack was in rather a prominent position, I grant you. Still, I don't see how you could call the murder itself 'public.' "

"No. . . . No. Of course not," said Nigel, looking at Armstrong quizzically.

"Look here, sir, what is it? You've got something on your mind. What's this new theory of yours? You told me you'd come across with it this afternoon, one way or another."

"Yes, I know. But things have happened since that. This Vale business complicates matters. Hell and damnation," he went on, talking almost to himself, "and I could have stopped it. I had all the facts. I might have known—oh well, spilt milk and all that. I want a day more. They can't get away, can they? Let me know, by the way, when you're going to arrest them, and we'll see what your humble servant can do." Nigel rose wearily. As he was opening the door he turned and said over his shoulder, "And, incidentally, Armstrong, I'm prepared to lay twenty to one that you find the weapon in Evans' room to-morrow."

"Wh-wh-what?" gurgled the superintendent, but the only reply was a squeak from the closing door. "For all that," Nigel was saying to himself on the other side, "I wish I knew where it is now."

Chapter XII

SHOCKS ALL ROUND

The next day was perhaps the busiest and most eventful in Nigel Strangeways' life. Before twelve hours of it had elapsed, the whole structure of deceit and misrepresentation which the murderer had erected had fallen in like a house of cards. It was a terrible day for Michael and Hero. Michael, waking early after fitful sleep, felt a vague night-mare weight upon his heart; he remembered that it was exactly a week since he had woken up in sunlight and kissed Hero in the haystack—a week since some one had tied a piece of string round a boy's neck. But it was not this that oppressed him. Then he remembered; he had started from sleep in the middle of the night and suddenly realised the full meaning of the superintendent's activities that evening. They suspected Hero of killing her husband, and himself of hiding the weapon. So obvious, when one came to think of it. Hero's face, lovely and forlorn, rose up before his eyes; then the mists of fear came down, blotting out everything but the difficult and treacherous path beneath his feet—a path, he reflected grimly, so likely to end now in a sheer drop. Nigel said he knew—that was his last hope. Hero herself lay in bed, wan and wide-eyed. Wherever she turned she could see nothing but a body with a tiny hole in the back and a tiny ooze of blood on the grey coat. That she was free at last, free to marry Michael; that at least one person believed her to be the murderess of her husband—these things did not enter her mind. The darkness of physical horror still enveloped it too closely. It was an exciting day for Superintendent Armstrong and more than one of the staff. It was a day notable, moreover, for perhaps the only triumph in the drab life of Hugo Sims.

Michael got out of bed and studied his face curiously in the glass. It looked exactly the same as it had looked a week ago. No pallor, no dark pouches, none of the conventional imprints of mental anguish. He felt vaguely resentful; one might at least have something to show for it. He dressed and opened the door to go downstairs. As he closed it behind him another memory started up out of his unconscious. Sometime last night, in the shadowy gulf between waking and sleeping, he had heard that same sound, seeming to come from a great distance. It couldn't really have come from a great distance, of course, or he wouldn't have heard it. It was probably part of a dream, anyway. He dismissed it from his mind.

Michael took out pencil and paper, and wrote a little note. "Darling Hero, I love you. Remember, I shall love you always and whatever happens. When you want me, I will come. Be brave. Michael." He folded it up, knocked on Hero's door and slipped it underneath. Then he went down to breakfast. They were all there, Nigel too. He saw Nigel's lips moving, "It'll be all right, don't worry," he seemed to be saying. The masters treated him with a strange blend of awe and pity and embarrassment, as though he were dying of a plague. Of course, they had seen him and Hero. Every one must know about that now, and every one must be thinking the same as the superintendent. Only Griffin remained constant in friendship. Michael felt nothing but love and fidelity in his attitude. Having paid their respects to the dying man, so to speak, the masters returned to the topic they had been discussing before his entry.

"No, no," Tiverton was saying, "even supposing any of us had the money to buy the place, we'd not get the boys. Do you suppose the parents will send their children to a place where two murders have been committed?"

"Good-bye to our little bread-and-butters, eh, Tiverton?" said Gadsby. "I think you are taking too pessimistic a view of things. We don't know, of course,"—here he lowered his voice discreetly and gave a wary glance in Michael's direction, a perfect example of tactless tact—"what Mrs. Vale's plans are, but I imagine she would be only too glad to get rid of the school. My advice to you, Tiverton, is to sound the parents and see how many would continue to send their boys to us if we moved to some other part of the country. There's nothing like trying, is there?"

Sims leant across to Tiverton with a worried expression. "I agree with Gadsby. I mean, it's very awkward for some of us. There are so few jobs going nowadays, especially for older men. I'm sure the parents would be sympathetic. After all, it's not our fault that all this has happened."

"Not *our* fault," said Wrench, "but the fault of one of us. Or do you attribute these murders to some outside agency?"

There was a frozen and scandalised silence; the kind of silence that obtained in the Common Room when some one had the bad taste to bring Russia or religion into the conversation, Michael noticed. He glanced across at Nigel. His friend was sitting quite still, staring noncommittally down his nose and listening far harder than any one would have supposed. He looked just like a junior master, listening respectfully to his seniors. Griffin broke the silence. "I'm all for the idea. Let things calm down a bit, and then start off somewhere else. I rather fancy you as a head beak, Tiverton."

"Yes," said Wrench enthusiastically, "we could have something like a school. Do away with all these ridiculous petty restrictions and teach boys to think in English instead of Latin."

Wrench was going down badly this morning. His last remark was an implied criticism, not only of the late headmaster, but of the whole school. And the first thing a schoolmaster must learn is to venture no criticism of a school till he has been there at least two years. However much masters may dislike each other or the system under which they are working, the fact of working together in a group unites them in opposition to the criticisms of any newcomer. It was Sims this time who broke the hostile silence. "I know. We could do an awful lot, couldn't we?" he said, his eyes shining. Every one was taken rather aback. Then Tiverton remarked, in the encouraging, slightly patronising tones which every one seemed to use towards Sims when they were not snubbing or ignoring him, "Well, what would you suggest?"

Blushing and stuttering, the little man proceeded to give a lecture on how he would run a school. It was really very good, Michael said to himself. Sims had evidently given a great deal of thought to the subject; it was a pity he was such a failure in practice. Sims suddenly realised the attention which was being given to his remarks, and trailed off into silence, blushing more furiously than ever. Wrench was looking sulky at this stealing of his thunder. Gadsby patted Sims on the back. "Well done, old man," he said effusively; then, collecting eyes and showing Sims, as it were, like an infant prodigy, "He's got quite a lot under his bald patch, has old Simmie. Ought to be a headmaster. I always say, you never know what there is in a fullah till——"

"Last time you treated us to that observation it referred to a capacity for murder," Wrench pointed out sourly. Every one began simultaneously talking about something else, and breakfast was finished to an accompaniment of inconsequential chatter. When it was over, Nigel drew Griffin and Evans aside. "There are one or two things I want to get clear about yesterday. You'll be able to tell me, Griffin, how is the umpiring arranged—I mean, is it the regular thing for umpires to change in the middle of the game?"

Griffin gave him a long, steady look. "I see. . . . Yes. We generally do as we did yesterday; take it in spells."

"When did Tiverton ask to be relieved?"

"He didn't. I suggested it at tea. He's got a bit of a gammy leg—the War, you know—and can't do with standing about for too long."

"Was it your own idea to run in for water when Mrs. Vale fainted, Michael?"

"Of course, what else could I do? They'd removed all the tea things from the tent."

"Nobody else suggested it too, I mean?"

"Well, I think somebody did say 'fetch her some water,' as a matter of fact. But I should have gone anyway."

"Who was it?"

"I really have no idea. I was not in a state to notice."

Nigel left them and went into the Common Room. Tiverton, Wrench and Sims were there. "I want to get it quite clear what every one's position was immediately after the murder," Nigel said. Each of them explained. "And it was when you were bending over Mr. Vale that you noticed Mrs. Vale had fainted and told Evans to get some water?" Nigel was looking impartially at the three of them; it was difficult to know to whom the question was addressed.

"*I* never said that," said Tiverton at once.

"I thought it was you who made the suggestion, Sims," said Wrench.

"I don't think so. I may have, of course. I mean, it's the natural thing to say. Perhaps I did. Everything happened so suddenly. Yet, I don't seem to remember." Sims shook his head in a puzzled way.

Nigel asked a few more questions, then left them. He next walked into the Day Room, detached Stevens II. from a circle of boys loudly discussing the demise of their late headmaster, and brought him out on to the field.

"Stevens," he said, "are there any hiding-places in the school which no one would be likely to know about?"

"I say, sir, do you want to hide somewhere?"

"No; I mean places where you could hide a thing, quite a small thing?"

Stevens considered. "Well, sir, I suppose there are some. But I think they'd be pretty easy to find. We've played that game sometimes, but we always found the thing very quickly. It's a bare sort of place. I wish there were some secret passages or something."

"Mm. I was afraid so. By the way, do you ever have fire-alarms here—practice ones?"

"Rather. Jolly good sport. There's a whopping great bell, just outside No. 1 dormitory. When it rings every one has to hurry out of school and form up in the yard—that's in the daytime. At night we form up in the dormies instead, and the masters come in and we slide down those chute things. We made somebody ring it once as a test for the Black Spot, but there was a frightful row; he got tanned, and Percy said any one who did it again would be expelled because if people kept on doing it there might be a fire one day and no one would take any notice because they'd think it was another joke and every one would be burnt to a crisp," Stevens recited breathlessly.

"That's rather a pity," said Nigel slowly, "you see I wanted it rung today. Oh well, it can't be helped."

Stevens' eyes twinkled. "I'll ring it, sir."

"Will you really? That's awfully decent of you. I want it done five minutes before lunch. And you're going to be caught."

Stevens stared at him. "Caught? What do you mean, sir?"

"Mr. Griffin is going to catch you. That's part of the plot. But don't worry about that. I'll see it's all right. And don't tell any one. You must swear not to tell any one until Mr. Griffin catches you."

Stevens bound himself by the most bloodcurdling of the Black Spot oaths, and was then sent in to fetch Smithers. Nigel did not expect that the boy would be able to tell him anything very important, but he wanted to clear up loose ends before making his dispositions for the final attack. He was more certain than ever that his theory of the case was the only possible one, but he had no more material proof of it than when he first formed the theory. There was just the chance, a hundred to one chance, a very long shot indeed. . . . But then, the weapon. It made no difference to his theory where it was found or indeed whether it was found at all, but it piqued him; his total and abject failure to imagine how the murderer had disposed of it. Smithers aroused him from his reverie.

Michael and Griffin, strolling towards school from the far side of the field, saw the meeting between Nigel and Smithers. They saw the two walking slowly along the path towards them, the boy talking up into the man's face and holding with shy affection on to his sleeve. They saw Nigel walk slower, and then suddenly stop quite dead as though he had seen a cobra in front of him; his head jerked forward; Michael was near enough to see that his face was lit up. It did not look like astonishment or satisfaction; it seemed to be a mixture of the two. Michael hurried towards them. He felt certain that something very important had happened; also, he had just remembered again the noise he had heard in the night, and thought Nigel might as well know about it. As he approached, he heard Nigel saying, ". . . tell the superintendent. It's all right. I'll explain to him."

Smithers moved away. "You look as if the angel Gabriel had appeared in person to you," Michael said.

"An angel in disguise, as they say. I've just been getting the inside dope on the Wemyss killing. This is going to make Armstrong look pretty blue. The trouble is, he'll never believe that I had guessed it long ago——"

"Good Lord, you don't mean that Smithers——?" interrupted Michael.

"Oh no, he is not the perpetrator of the dastardly outrage. It took a good deal more brains than that poor lad is blessed with. Well, I must run along and tell the superintendent that this is where he gets off."

"Just a minute. It's probably unimportant, but something happened last night——"

It was Nigel's turn to interrupt, "You heard the door of your sitting-room open, perhaps."

"Oh, it was *you,* was it?"

"No. Unless I walk in my sleep."

"Then how the deuce——?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson. I'll explain later. By the way, Armstrong may conceivably arrest you and Hero this morning. But don't let it impair your appetite. We'll have you out again before the evening."

Nigel walked off towards the school, leaving Michael gaping in an unbecoming manner. "Your friend seems in good spirits," said Griffin, who had just come up. "Yes, he's just told me that I shall probably be arrested before lunch." It was Griffin who gaped now. After a bit, he said wistfully, "I suppose you wouldn't like some one to give that policeman a sock in the jaw, would you?"

"Not just at present, thanks very much all the same. . . ."

Nigel went through into the private side of the house and discovered Armstrong in the morning-room, gazing complacently at an object laid before him on the table. Nigel moved closer to inspect it. It was a thin length of steel, which had been filed to a point at one end.

"Is this a dagger that I see before me?" he asked.

"That's right, Mr. Strangeways." The superintendent beamed. "Found it in Mr. Evans' room, resting on top of the picture rail. Pearson swore it wasn't there last night. Reckon he didn't look properly, myself. I didn't half tell him off. That was a good guess of yours, sir."

"Pretty obvious. The murderer has been trying to incriminate Evans all along. He fetched the thing in the night from wherever he'd hidden it and stuck it up there."

An almost theatrical expression of scepticism appeared on Armstrong's face.

"Evans thought he heard his sitting-room door being opened last night," continued Nigel.

"Sez he!"

"You're very skittish this morning, superintendent. I shall always know now what the early bird looks like when he has caught the worm."

"Well, sir, mustn't waste any more time. I'm sorry; very painful for you, sir. Got the warrant here," he tapped his side pocket, "going to arrest them now and get it over."

"Sez you."

The superintendent, who had half risen from his chair, lowered himself back into it with great deliberation.

"Now what *is* it, Mr. Strangeways? Here am I just about to arrest a friend of yours for murder, and there are you grinning fit to split your face. If you've really got something, hadn't you better come across with it?"

"I'm going to bring in a boy called Smithers, and I want you to promise not to ballyrag him. He's been withholding valuable information, but quite unintentionally. If you start blustering at him, he'll probably dry up altogether. He's very sensitive, though he doesn't look it."

Armstrong tried to look hurt. "Come sir, you know I never bully witnesses."

Nigel rolled his eyes mutely up to heaven. Then he went out and returned with Smithers. The boy sat down stiffly in a straight-backed chair, casting an apprehensive glance at the superintendent.

"All right," said Nigel, "he won't eat you; he's quite a nice man really." Armstrong passed his finger round the inside of his collar. "Now then," Nigel went on, "the superintendent would like to know what you told me just now. Start where you went upstairs."

"Well, sir, just before the sports I went up to see Mr. Wrench. I'd just finished an impot., you see. He wasn't in his room, so I waited a minute or two."

"And then?" said Nigel encouragingly.

"I looked out of the window. You can see the hayfield from it. I saw Wemyss in the haystack," he broke off lamely.

"Well, what about it? We all know he was in the haystack then. He'd just been murdered," said Armstrong impatiently.

"Oh, n-no," stammered the boy. "I mean he was there, of course. You see he waved to me."

"He WHAT?" bellowed the superintendent, starting out of his chair.

Smithers bit his lip. He looked as if he were going to cry.

"That's all right, old man," said Nigel. "Mr. Armstrong is just a little surprised, that's all."

"Did I hear you say he WAVED to you?" asked the superintendent, making a herculean effort to control his seething emotions.

"Yes, sir. I s'pose he heard me opening the window or something. He was sitting up against the side of the haystack, and he waved his hand."

"Just after morning school Wemyss hinted to Smithers that he was going to be tried for the Black Spot Society—a gross breach of confidence by the way, but Wemyss wanted to crow over Smithers. Smithers said he didn't believe the Black Spot would ever think of having a worm like Wemyss for a member, or words to that effect. So Wemyss told him it was a deadly secret, and he (Smithers) would be murdered if he let out anything about it. That's why Smithers held his tongue when you asked if any boy knew what Wemyss was doing after school," amplified Nigel.

"And when did you leave Mr. Wrench's rooms?" asked the superintendent, in an ominously quiet voice.

"Immediately after that, sir. I only got on to the field just in time for the first race."

Seeing that Armstrong was blowing up for a hurricane, Nigel dismissed the boy with a nod. Armstrong beat his clenched fist slowly against the table.

"That means Wemyss was not murdered till after two-thirty," he said incredulously.

"Your deduction is inexpugnable."

"Gawd! Now we've got to start all over again. Look here, sir, was this your great idea?" Armstrong said suspiciously.

"Yes; believe it or not, I'd decided some time ago that Wemyss hadn't been killed when you thought. But I had no proof till this morning."

"Well, hadn't you better tell me exactly when he was killed, and by whom?"

Nigel looked down his nose. "I think not. I need one thing to prove my case. If I don't get it, I shall have no more material proof than you have against Evans and Mrs. Vale—a sight less, in fact. We can do you a very nice variety of suspects, though. Wrench running out on to the field, so he says, when the pistol went off; he might have taken the haystack en route. All the masters were on the field during the sports and they've all got nice alibis for after the sports. All of them except Griffin were near enough to Vale to murder him during the cricket match. You're going to have a jolly morning's work."

The superintendent groaned. "For all that, sir, Mrs. Vale and Mr. Evans are my choice for the second murder. And if they did the second, one of them presumably did the first," he said doggedly.

"So you're going to arrest them still, are you?"

"Ah, that's another matter."

Nigel blinked at Armstrong in a friendly way. "You know, I wish you would. I half promised Evans you would, in fact."

Armstrong gaped.

"You see," Nigel went on, " the murderer wants them hung. Every one is expecting you to arrest them. If you don't, the murderer will know you've found some new evidence, and I'm rather afraid he may get impatient and have a shot at doing them in himself."

Armstrong hesitated. "That's only your theory, sir."

"Please. You can't do any harm by arresting them. And we don't want any more murders for a day or two." Nigel spoke lightly, but there was a strong compulsion in his look. "Don't you see," he added, "it will put the murderer off his guard too. Knowing they are in prison, he may get careless and give something away when you question him on your new lines."

Armstrong extricated his huge bulk from the chair. "Very well, sir, as you say, it can't do any harm."

"That stiletto affair, what do you make of it?" asked Nigel.

"It's queer, sir. An ordinary carpenter's tool, you can see for yourself, with the end filed to a point. Wiped clean, of course; no fingermarks or traces of blood. Pearson is inquiring which of the masters used the carpenter's shop here and whether any tools are missing. Anything strike you about it—the weapon, I mean?" Armstrong gave Nigel a sly look.

"Well, I don't know. Yes, of course, why has the handle been removed?"

"Exactly, sir. And I can tell you for why. It had to be removed in order that the weapon might be hidden. I've tried with a tool of the same size that had the handle, and you can see it just sticking out over the top of the picture rail. And, by jove, sir! Look at it this way. If the murderer, as you suggest, put it there to incriminate Mr. Evans, he'd have left the handle on because he'd want it to be noticed. Therefore, I say it's Mr. Evans who put it there."

"Think again. It was mere chance that Evans didn't go into his sitting-room before you this morning. If the murderer had any sense, he wouldn't leave the handle on, because Evans might notice it, and get rid of the weapon before you came. He was pretty sure you'd look again, so he arranged it that an expert search would find it, but a casual glance shouldn't."

"Umm. You've got a brain-box all right, Mr. Strangeways. Well, handle or no handle, I must be getting on with the job. See you later."

As Armstrong left the room, Nigel was muttering to himself, "The handle; the handle; why? There's more to it than that, I'm certain."

He went out and found Griffin. He told him about the false alarm of fire that was scheduled for twelve fifty-five. "Now, first, I want every one out of the school, boys and masters. If necessary, you must start a panic in the Common Room yourself. And second, when every one's been outside for about five minutes, you've got to catch Stevens II.—he'll try to skulk out unnoticed—and make a great fuss about a practical joke. Get him to confess publicly, before all the masters."

"I'll see to all that."

"Good man. I'm hoping that that five minutes will give me the key to everything."

Nevertheless, sitting again with the superintendent at twelve-fifty, Nigel felt as nervous as a dramatist on the first night of his first play. It is one thing to make psychological deductions, and quite another to follow them blindfolded into the minefield of fact. He stirred uneasily and looked at his watch, and became aware that Armstrong was speaking.

". . . Like a cat on hot bricks, as you might say. I don't believe you've been listening at all, Mr. Strangeways. Is the murderer late for his appointment, or what is it?"

"Listening? Oh yes, I've been listening—'the bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell'; or shall we say, 'me to heaven and thee to hell.' You were saying——"

"An inch or two further. They were all at the sports. Can't swear to each other's presence for every minute of the time, of course. You can call it a perfect alibi or no alibi at all. But what does it signify? Who's going to commit a murder with all those people walking around?"

"He couldn't be seen in the haystack."

"He had to get to it, didn't he? And back? No, the only hope is tea time. I've had another talk with that Mould. He's a poor sort of witness, but he admits that he may not have had Griffin under his eye the whole time they were tidying up the field. I know four o'clock was fixed as the final limit, but I've just had a talk with Dr. Maddox on the 'phone and he says that rigor is often delayed by sudden death. Now supposing Wemyss——"

Armstrong's disquisition was cut short by a terrific clangour overhead. Stevens II. was certainly doing himself proud. The tongue of the great fire bell hammered and yammered as though London Town was burning, filling their ears with harsh waves of sound. Armstrong looked startled for a moment, then he winked slyly at Nigel. "You mentioned a knell, didn't you, sir?"

"Yes. This is zero-hour. Just go and stimulate the panic, will you? I want the school to myself for a few minutes."

Nigel went and peeped through the door that divided the private side from the school. The pot seemed to be boiling admirably. Boys were scurrying out by the two main exits. A hum of wild surmise and several half-repressed female shrieks came from the kitchen and dining-hall on his left; Masters began to emerge from the Common Room; Gadsby trying not to hurry; Sims almost scuttling at his side; Tiverton walking calmly to one of the doors and rebuking in sub-acid tones four boys who were trying to get through it simultaneously. Last came Griffin and Wrench. Griffin had a firm grip of the other's elbow. Nigel heard Wrench saying, ". . . fantastic! Who the hell would arrange a fire practice for to-day?" "Some ass probably set fire to the dinner. Come along, we're supposed to go outside."

Nigel waited till the sounds in the school had died down and he could hear Tiveton calling the roll on the field. Then he dashed into the Common Room, went up to one of the lockers, rummaged in it, withdrew something, studied it for half a minute, and ran out through the private side on to the field. It had been so much easier than he expected: and yet, no; it was all of a piece.

"What was all that din?" he said to the group of masters. "Sounded like the end of the world."

"Some ass rung the fire-alarm. Griffin's gone to investigate. Stevens II. didn't answer his name, so I expect he's the culprit," said Tiverton.

"A queer day to choose for a practical joke," grumbled Wrench. "Oh, here he comes."

Griffin rolled on to the field, leading Stevens urgently by the ear. Tiverton stepped forward.

"Was it you who rang that bell?" His voice snapped like a whip.

Stevens II. wriggled and cast a doubtful glance at Nigel, who did not return it.

"You don't deny it? You needn't look so proud of yourself." Stevens didn't, as a matter of fact, but Tiverton was "in a fair bate," as the boys put it, quite pale with anger. "It was a stupid, baby trick. Get inside and I'll deal with you after lunch."

The school trailed in again. Nigel and Armstrong remained behind for a moment.

"Well, are you happy now, sir?"

"Mm. So, so." Nigel looked, in point of fact, abstracted and rather melancholy. He fingered something that reposed in his capacious inside pocket. "And what are you going to do this afternoon, Armstrong?"

"Just keep on at it, sir, until the oracle sees fit to speak; just keep pegging away, that's how mysteries are solved, you know, sir."

"Yes. Pegging away. I wonder what the source of that metaphor is. Clothes-pegs, whisky-pegs, tent-pegs——" his eyes blazed up like a heath on fire. "Oh! oh, my holy heavens! What abysmal fools we are! Tent-pegs. Quick!" And he dragged the superintendent towards the place where Vale's body had died and fallen.

Chapter XIII

"GIVE ME SOME LIGHT: AWAY!"

The marquee had been taken away early that morning. But it was not, apparently, in the marquee that Nigel was interested. He went down on his knees, close to the spot where the body had lain, the superintendent watching him indulgently, like a bear the antics of its cub, and prodded a long stick into a hole in the ground; then he moved along a yard or two and prodded again; then he got on to his feet and beckoned to the superintendent.

"Look on this puncture and on this." Armstrong bent and peered into the second cavity. He shook his head, bewildered. He moved over to the first, peered, stiffened and pounced.

"Good Lord, Mr. Strangeways, you've got it! This hole goes down much deeper. It's—well, I'll be damned for a——" The superintendent made a number of discreditable reflections on his ancestry.

"I doubt if it's as bad as all that," Nigel said soothingly, "it would have taken in any one. This murderer is infinitely subtle, but his nerve is greater even than his subtlety. It takes brains to think of how to hide the vital clues right under our noses, but it takes even more nerve to go and do it. The courage of despair," he went on, half to himself, "no, not quite 'despair'; call it——"

Armstrong interrupted, "That's all very well, sir, but I can't let myself off so easily. To think that that blasted dagger was sticking in the ground the whole time while we were turning every one and everything inside out. I swear I'll be glad to get the fellow hung," he said vindictively.

"It's an example of safety in numbers. One tent-peg would have attracted attention; but a dozen of 'em, all sitting round quietly, and pulling their weight and looking thoroughly respectable. No, you might as well have gone tearing up the bushes expecting to find a blade instead of a root."

"How do you figure out the details, Mr. Strangeways?"

"I imagine the murderer got hold of an ordinary tent-peg, sawed off the end and fitted that chisel thing into the top. Then he waited for his opportunity and substituted the contraption for one of the pegs that were already in the ground after the tent had been put up. The arrangements for these school functions are apt to be pretty identical from year to year, so he'd know exactly where Vale was likely to sit—the contiguity of the position to the tent probably gave him the idea to start off with—and chose the peg that would be nearest to his seat. Or he may have done it after the seats were arranged. You can ask Tiverton for times; he superintended the seating."

"Yes, by Gad," broke in Armstrong eagerly, "he had only to stand unobtrusively near Mr. Vale, wait till a crucial moment of the game, pull the tent-peg dagger out of the ground, stab him, and put it back. I dunno, it sounds so easy. It *was* easy, mechanically, as you might say. But, just think, sir, would you or I ever bring ourselves to do it? I mean, even at the most critical point of a game, you can't be certain that every one will have his eyes fastened on it."

"You or I, or most people, would certainly not bring ourselves to do it. But we are normal people. The murderer is abnormal or, shall we say, every one is abnormal when he commits murder. He is either blinded by the heat of the moment, or he has screwed himself slowly up to the state of mind in which one is automatically compelled, as it were, to take advantage of the occasion and one's own preparations. He was quite safe up till that point, too. You see, if no occasion had offered, he'd just have left the weapon in the ground and removed it at the first opportunity. That is another point of similarity between the murder and——" he broke off suddenly. But the superintendent was following out a private train of thought.

"That business of the seating, you know, sir, the murderer couldn't rely on Mr. Vale being near enough to that particular tent-peg to make it safe. And he doesn't seem the sort of cove who leaves much to chance. It was Mr. Tiverton, you say, who arranged the seating?" he continued after a pause, "and Mr. Tiverton stopped umpiring at the tea interval, and Mr. Tiverton was the first to be seen bending over the body. Mm."

Nigel eyed him speculatively. "Tiverton and Sims were the first, to be strictly accurate. By the way, did you find out anything about the weapon itself?"

"It comes from the school workshop all right—at least, Gadsby says there's an identical one missing; he's in charge of the workshop, you know. But all the masters had access to it."

"And your case against Evans and Mrs. Vale?"

"Well, that's about as it was, sir. She could easily have reached the tent-peg from where she was sitting. They could have done it, of course.

But if they did, why leave the weapon in his room for us to find? The trouble in this case is the difficulty of establishing motive. Evans and Mrs. Vale have a pretty clear one for the second murder and a conceivable one for the first. Wrench might have killed Wemyss because the boy had found out about him and Rosa, but why should he kill Mr. Vale?"

"His career. Vale might also have discovered his relations with the girl. He'd never get taken on at any school if that became public."

"You may be right, sir. I must have another go at Rosa. Then there's Sims. He had a grudge against Wemyss all right. But again, why Vale?"

"He had a first-class row with the headmaster the other day." Nigel gave the details.

"Did he just? Excuse me, sir, but I thought we were to share all information," said Armstrong, looking rather aggrieved.

"I've not been double-crossing you. That fact could not be of any significance till Vale was murdered. It told us nothing about the Wemyss affair."

"That's true enough, I suppose. Though it might have helped us to prevent the second murder. Still, motive again. We don't go killing our superior officers because they put us on the mat. Now take Tiverton. He might have killed Wemyss, and he's still more suspect in the case of Vale. But why should he?"

Nigel related some of the conversation at breakfast that morning. "So, you see, he would have the good will of the masters and a fair number of the parents at least. With Vale out of the way he stood a good chance of being headmaster, supposing the school continued."

"But he'd no earthly reason, as far as we know, for murdering Wemyss. Then there's Griffin. He looks more promising for the first murder, but there's no motive; and he couldn't possibly have done the second. I suppose the two murders were committed by the same person." Armstrong fingered his chin doubtfully.

"That's pretty evident, I think. What about Gadsby, by the way?"

Armstrong snorted. "That soaker! He'd not have the nerve. And what motive had he got, anyway?"

Nigel looked down his nose. The superintendent kicked his heels irritably. "Here am I going on like a talkie, and all the time you know who the murderer is. One would think you wanted him hushed up."

"I'm sorry, but it's been very difficult. I was certain in my own mind that I knew, but I had no facts; and at any moment new facts might have come to light which would have disproved my theory."

"Well, have they?"

Nigel ignored the question. "I've got hold of the key now, I think. But I've not had time to—er—examine it properly yet. I want to have a reconstruction of the first crime at two-thirty this afternoon. I think I can promise that will give you the criminal. We don't need the boys, of course, just the masters. I'm going in to lunch now and I'll tell them."

"Do you want Mr. Evans?"

"No. No, we can do without him. In fact, he'd very much better not come."

"Very well, sir. I'll be back by two-fifteen. I must get on to the firm that supplied the tent first. Not that that will be any use. Presumably the murderer came out last night and substituted the tent-peg he'd originally removed for the doctored one, but I reckon he's not left any finger-prints about. Still, the men may have noticed Tiverton moving the chairs. Got to do something: I can't just stand about while you solve the problem."

The superintendent touched his cap and moved away. Nigel went slowly up to his room and, taking out the object which he had found in the Common Room, proceeded to make a thorough examination of it. Then he slipped it under his mattress: one could take no chances now; if its owner got it back again and destroyed it, he could snap his fingers in Nigel's face. He rather wished he had shown it to the superintendent. And yet, no, that would have deprived him of his triumph. Nigel had a weakness for consummating a case in the most spectacular way possible; it was a kind of extravagant repayment to himself for all the wearisome business that preceded. He thought again. Not this time; he must forgo part of his spectacle. Had one of those hypothetical observers, so dear to the heart of Thomas Hardy, been present in Nigel Strangeways' bedroom at that moment, he would have seen on his face emotions highly unsuited to a detective on the threshold of success—pity, regret, indecision, pensive brooding, determination. After a little he looked at his watch and went hurriedly downstairs. A short search in the school and he had found an object similar to the one removed from the Common Room and put it carefully back in the place of the other. Then he waited for the masters to come out from lunch.

When they entered, it became evident that there had been some controversy during lunch over the Stevens II. outrage. "Tan the little blighter's hide for him," said Gadsby, "nothing like teaching 'em a lesson. But I should let it stop there, Tiverton, really I would."

"We can scarcely afford any more scandals just now, certainly," remarked Wrench.

Griffin turned rather distractedly to Nigel; he clearly did not know his cue. "Look here, Strangeways, you're not an interested party. Tiverton says Stevens ought to be kicked out because of this bogus fire-alarm business. It happened once before and Vale said if it happened again the offender would be expelled, but——"

"It seems awfully silly, making such a fuss over a trifling thing like this, when—well, I mean to say, murder rather puts everything else in the shade," stammered Sims.

"That is obvious enough," said Tiverton acidly, "but our job is to run this school and keep discipline; we can't let them get away with anything just because a murder's been committed."

"One merely suggests that it's a bit gratuitous expelling boys when half of them will be taken away by their parents anyhow," said Wrench in his most irritating voice.

"Like throwing the rats out of the sinking ship," smiled Griffin.

Nigel, gazing modestly down his nose, meditated on the curiosities of human nature. Here was a body of quite ordinary men, seriously discussing a boy's delinquency, with a fellow creature lying murdered, scarcely cold, as the papers would say, a few yards off. It was the normal working of their defence-mechanism, of course. In proportion to the seriousness with which each of them was taking Stevens' escapade, one could estimate the depth of his reaction to the murder. Tiverton evidently felt it most acutely; Wrench, probably, next, for cynicism and flippancy were his type of protection against the stirrings of the heart. Nigel became aware that Gadsby was speaking to him. It was one of Gadsby's most irritating characteristics, to ask a rhetorical question and single out some individual for an answer.

"Well, I really am not qualified to express an opinion. But I think it might be allowed to wait over till this evening. You see, I want to have a reconstruction of the crime—the first crime—at two-thirty."

There was a sensible tightening of the atmosphere, a feeling as though the ghost they had been trying to exorcise was at the door again. Gadsby was the first to speak. "A reconstruction of the crime? You mean you've not found out yet——?"

"Don't be a fool," said Griffin, "you don't suppose Evans and Mrs. Vale really did it, do you?"

Gadsby bridled. "I never said I did. But, damn it all, somebody must have. And they *have* been arrested."

"It's just a blind, is it—their arrest?" said Tiverton slowly. His brown, tight-drawn face appeared expressionless.

"Not exactly that," said Nigel equivocally, "the police have a very good case against them, I'm afraid. They never take action unless they have, you know. Of course, it may be that Armstrong has been badgered into it. I imagine the chief constable has been getting pretty impatient."

Griffin laughed grimly. "I should think it's about as easy to badger Armstrong into doing anything against his will as to barrack a Lancashire opening batsman into scoring runs."

Wrench leaned forward. "What's this about a reconstruction of the crime?"

"I'm asking every one—all of you, that is—to go through the same actions as you did at the beginning of the sports."

"And what's the big idea?"

"Not a very big one, I fear," said Nigel mildly, "but I want to get the relative positions clear, and there's a chance that something may turn up, some loophole we've not noticed before."

"Is this a sort of Hamlet stunt, the murderer going to rush off calling for lights and so on?" said Wrench with a sneer. "You have a very ingenuous mind for a detective, Strangeways."

"Are the boys to take part in this—er—reconstruction?" said Sims.

"No. That will not be necessary."

"Which means," said Tiverton, "that you suspect one of us in this room to be the murderer."

Nigel looked him full in the eyes for a moment. "That is an unwarrantable inference. I hope to expose the method of the crime by my reconstruction. There's no doubt that the murderer was a person fully cognizant of the workings of the school. I can't go further than that at present."

There was an awkward silence, broken finally by Gadsby. "Aren't you rather frightened, then, rubbing shoulders all day with a murderer? I wonder he doesn't have a go with you," he said with gruesome jocularity.

"Perhaps he considers it unnecessary," said Wrench.

Nigel disregarded the impolite innuendo. "I can't say I'm terribly frightened, though I must admit I keep a revolver under my pillow. I've rubbed shoulders with criminals before, and it was generally they who suffered the most."

The mention of the revolver created a minor sensation. It brought home to them the state of spiritual blockade in which they had been living for a whole week. Though it was not before their eyes, it seemed more solid and vivid than had the body of Percival Vale with the little rivulet of crimson down the back. Gadsby, with his usual infelicity, put the general thought into words:

"Somehow brings the thing home to a fullah—that, don't it? I mean, about Strangeways' revolver——"

"We don't all inhabit fools' paradises," interrupted Wrench sharply.

Gadsby ignored him. "It's amazing how small things stick in one's head, don't you think, Tiverton? I remember——"

Wrench interrupted again. "Like fish bones in one's throat." He took out his watch. "Nearly two. Just about this time a week ago one of us was getting set to commit a murder. I wonder how he feels about it now."

Tiverton jerked in his chair and exclaimed, "For God's sake, Wrench, try to behave like a normal human being and not like a Greek chorus."

Nigel rose. "May I ask you all, then, from two-fifteen onward to go through exactly the same actions as you did last Wednesday." He looked impassively towards the corner where Wrench was sitting. *"Exactly* the same actions." Wrench turned his face away a little. "I shall take Evans' part myself. That reminds me. Will you give me the stop-watch he had, Griffin? What was the exact time the race took?"

Griffin told him the record and after a little fumbling in one of the lockers produced the watch. Nigel turned to Sims. "Could I have just a word with you?"

Four pairs of ears were strained to their uttermost as the two went out into the passage, but all they could hear was:

"Look here, Sims, I want you to——"

There was silence for a few moments after the voices had died away. Gadsby made one or two attempts to resuscitate the conversation, then he also went out, "to prime himself for the ordeal," Wrench said.

"What do you think of our private investigator now?" asked Griffin.

Tiverton considered. "Well, he doesn't seem to have done much so far; he's supposed to be examining the case in the interests of the school, yet here he is practically accusing us to our faces of harbouring a murderer on the staff."

"You mean, if he has found the murderer here, he ought to drop the case and go away with the solution under his hat? A highly immoral suggestion to my mind," commented Griffin.

Wrench broke in. "I say, what is the superintendent driving at now? You know all those questions he's been asking this morning, about where we were standing during the sports and what we were doing after them. It's rather perplexity-making"—Griffin shuddered—"I mean, it was obvious, wasn't it, that the murder was committed before the sports."

"Apparently not," said Tiverton grimly, "otherwise, why this reconstruction of Strangeways'?"

"I wonder what he wants with that watch?" said Griffin.

"And with Sims?" said Wrench.

At about ten minutes after two Armstrong ran Nigel to earth on the hayfield. Armstrong was evidently boiling over with news, but he postponed it for a moment to ask, "What are you doing with all those deck chairs, Mr. Strangeways, sir? Going to set up as a Lido proprietor?"

Nigel acknowledged the jest politely. "No, I am building something to represent the haystack. You are looking very cheerful, aren't you?"

"Just been having another talk with our Rosa." He paused provocatively, but Nigel refused the gambit, so he continued in slightly deflated tones: "I went to Strang's first. No luck with the tent-pegs, of course, but one of their men noticed Tiverton move two of the chairs a bit nearer to the tent."

Nigel stopped working. "Which two chairs?"

"The ones Mr. and Mrs. Vale were to occupy, as far as I can gather from his description. He's coming up this afternoon to verify it."

"And Rosa?"

The superintendent rubbed his hands. "Ah, there, sir, I think I have the advantage of you. You may be able to get round these boys, Mr. Strangeways, sir, but that type of girl—why, I know 'em like I know the back of my hand."

"For shame, Mr. Armstrong, for shame."

Armstrong emitted a sound which, coming from any one less elephantine, would be called a giggle. "Be that as it may, sir, she's come across with something now, all right."

"I trust you were not brutal to the poor little thing."

"No, no. She didn't need no pressing, as you might say. You see, I know that class of girl. I said to myself that young Wrench is probably getting tired of her, or else he'll be laying off her for other reasons, now's the time to find out how much she really knows. Spiteful she is, see and she wouldn't mind what she said about Wrench if she thought he'd done with her."

"Can we cut the psychology? There's not much time."

"Well, I got it out of her that Wrench believed Wemyss knew about their affair, had seen him snooping about once just after he'd left her. A fair spitfire she is, Mr. Strangeways; as good as suggested that Wrench had done in young Wemyss to silence him. That's a pretty enough confirmation of motive, isn't it?"

"Hm. Doesn't sound a very reliable witness to me. Spite plus film-fed phantasy equals any amount of lies you like. However . . . I wonder what he's saying to her now."

Armstrong started.

"Yes. I told them all to go through exactly the same actions from two-fifteen that they went through on the day of the crime. Embarrassing for our Mr. Wrench when you come to think of it! Still, he may not take it literally. We shall see. Ah, things are beginning to start."

They could see Griffin, in the middle of the field, carrying a large revolver and going through a series of pantomime gestures over a row of imaginary hurdles. By his side, Mould, the groundsman, scratched alternately his head and the seat of his trousers. Nigel finished his business with the deck chairs, and walked with the superintendent towards the place where the race had started.

"Now, keep your eyes skinned," he said, "watch very carefully. You observe, I have nothing up my sleeve."

Armstrong made an offensive noise. "Watch? Who am I supposed to watch?"

"Every one."

Five minutes passed. Masters began to emerge from the school building. Griffin approached Nigel, looking expectant. "You're late on your lines," he said, "you've got to say 'Who were you thinking of shooting?' "

"Who were you thinking of shooting?"

"That moron Mouldy's gone and put out one too many sets of hurdles. Business with revolver. First juvenile lead and walking gentleman attempt to retire up left but are intercepted by Gadsby, comic relief. Where is Gadsby, by the way?"

"You've got a good memory. There he is, just coming out."

"He's missed his cue badly. You'd better cut that bit and go on to humorous dialogue with Tiverton, down right."

Nigel went.

"What do we call this in the profession, I wonder," said the irrepressible Griffin, "a post-mortem dress rehearsal. You know, it's rather an eerie business for us. Still, I cannot disappoint muh public and I think you Eenglish policemen are too sweet."

At this point Sims joined their group.

Armstrong muttered something. "A damn-fool business, if you ask me, sir. What Mr. Strangeways hopes to get out of it, I don't know. Only seems to have half his mind on it, too."

He pointed to where Nigel was talking in a distrait manner with Tiverton.

"Mm," said Griffin, "you'd think he was listening for something—angel voices, perhaps. Still, I'd put a packet on your distinguished co-adjutator; he's the dark horse for me. About time we started the race; we're all here. No, we're not. Where the devil is Wrench?"

Nigel came up to them. Armstrong and Griffin got the shock of their lives when they saw his face. Heaven knows, one might have expected a good number of emotions on it, but not what they saw—not, at this point, sheer astonishment. The astonishment gave way to a look almost of consternation. Then a blind as it were was drawn down over it, and he was standing beside them as impassive as ever.

Griffin touched him gently, as one might touch a sleep-walker. "I was just saying to the super., it's about time the race started."

Nigel blinked. "The race? Oh, yes. Yes. We must get on with the race." He seemed to be pulling himself out of a day-dream. His face became suddenly stern and formidable. Then he smiled at Armstrong and drawing him away from the others took a medium-sized exercise book out of one of his pockets. "You're looking bored, Armstrong. How about a little light literature? You'll find a full account of the crime—both crimes—in here. It's in shorthand. I hope you don't mind that. But it will be useful should—should anything go wrong with this little tableau vivant of mine. No, don't read it yet. Just curb your indecent curiosity for a moment or two."

He raised his voice and addressed the scattered groups. "Now, gentlemen, the 440 is about to begin. Will you all go to where you stood for the race, and try to imagine that it is actually being run. Try to follow every phase of the race. You've got to *see* the runners——"

"I say, where's Wrench?" said Tiverton.

"Never mind about Wrench. He'll be on the spot in due course. Now, Griffin."

The games-master moved to the starting point, murmuring to himself, "There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night." He took out an imaginary list and allotted stations to six imaginary boys. Then he engineered an intensely dramatic pistol-jam failure. By this time the audience was keyed up to a far higher pitch of excitement than that in which they had awaited the original race. Only Armstrong, standing between the group of masters and the school, watching like a cat the door by which Wrench should presently emerge, was outside the sphere of emotional influence.

"On your marks! Get set!" snapped Griffin. The revolver exploded like the crack of doom. "Come on, Anstruther!" shouted Nigel. The white oval on the turf, the drooping flags, the runners falling into line at the first bend—they all came back out of the past, those sunny images holding in a spell the inward eye of the watchers. Even the superintendent, whose ears were stretched as though to hear the feet of Wrench clattering downstairs, glanced involuntarily towards the expanse of turf before him. And then the spell was broken. Somebody was laughing, somewhere behind them; a cool, amused sort of chuckle; a sound that contained at first a hint of bravado, but soon changed to a quietly triumphant key, as though the performer had conquered his stage-fright and knew he was dominating his audience. He was. They whipped round all together. For a second they could see nothing; nothing but the path and the flat stubble of the hayfield. Then all eyes focused on the structure of deck chairs where the haystack had been. A head and shoulders showed above its top. Sims was there, peering benignly at them, chuckling away to himself. He looked like an undersized but confident cleric. He placed his hands on the deck chairs in front of him, as on a pulpit cushion, and gave his congregation the preliminary lookover, half winsome, half compelling, of the popular preacher. Then he began to address them. His tones were level and flowing. An expression of inward joy seemed to illuminate his plain face. One forgot the rabbit teeth and the ridiculous straggling moustache.

"It was quite easy, you see," he said, "every one was so intent on the race. The murderer had only to walk into the haystack, like I did just now, and strangle his victim, and walk back again. There was plenty of time. It was the same at the cricket match. One of the tent-pegs was really a dagger, you know. He just waited for his moment, pulled it out, stabbed once, and put it back again. It only took a couple of seconds. You see, in moments of great excitement, every one's attention is focused on one point and the whole strength of mass-emotion keeps it fixed on that point. Pickpockets work on that principle, of course."

He paused. There was a sigh of sheer amazement, half at his words, half at the strange transfiguration of himself. They almost expected him to raise a glass of water to his lips. Incredulous murmurs began to break out. Sims held up a hand, with an ineffable gesture of authority. In the renewed silence he began to speak again, his voice gathering power and volume.

"You are doubtless eager to know who the murderer was. I will keep you in suspense no longer. To evolve such schemes required brilliance—I think I may even say genius: to carry them out, a nerve and resolution beyond the capacity of most men. But there was some one you had always overlooked; one who appeared insignificant, incapable of brilliance or resolution. You ignored him or despised him, according to your natural bent. That was very silly of you. And he did something none of you could have ever contrived or dared to do. You see, gentlemen, I killed Wemyss and Vale. I hated them and I killed them—right in front of your noses. That is all, I think."

There was a second of blank and ravaged silence. Then Armstrong darted forward. But Sims reached unhurriedly into a pocket, gave them all a last flashing arrogant smile, drew out a revolver and shot himself dead. He had had his triumph.

Chapter XIV

MEMOIRS AND COMMENTARY

"Yes, hate. Just as in the celebrated Cain-Abel case. But the motive was too simple, too primitive for our sophisticated Armstrong. Murder for love; murder for money; murder to cover up a guilty secret; these are common coin for us nowadays. But to go and kill some one just because you hate him, that has become almost unintelligible to us. Which is why poor Sims so very nearly got away with it. He would have, too, if he hadn't tried to get two separate hates off his chest simultaneously."

"Wemyss and Vale? But you can't call that 'simultaneously.' "

"Oh no. I mean Wemyss and Vale on the one hand and you two on the other."

It was after dinner on the day of Hugo Sims' first and last public triumph. Nigel, Hero and Michael were talking in the drawing-room. They were feeling exhausted and happy. Nigel had a successful case behind him, and in front of him a large earthenware pot of tea. Hero was sitting on the floor by Michael's chair, with a hand in his and her golden hair shining against his knee; she looked wan still, like Eurydice just emerged from the shades, but the strain was gone; her body and her heart were relaxed. Michael looked down on her with infinite tenderness. It was as though she had come safe through childbirth; then he turned a rather bewildered glance on Nigel.

"Us two?"

"Mm. He bit off a little more than he could chew there." Nigel applied himself to his tea-drinking. Michael stirred restively, and Hero looked up at him—a sleepy look, that seemed to swim up from great depths, half-drowned with love.

"No doubt in your infinite wisdom you will vouchsafe us some explanation. Or is it one of the things we are not meant to understand." Michael spoke in the friendly, challenging, slightly acrid tones he and Nigel had used in their night-long controversies at Oxford. His friend, smiling, replied in the same vein.

"You wish to pose a question? Proceed. You have our ear."

"Dozens. But first, what's all this about Sims hating Hero and me? I know every one treated him like a subnormal child, but we were no worse than the rest, surely?"

"Ah, no, it wasn't that. As a matter of fact, I may have been a bit inaccurate in talking about pure hate. In your case, at any rate, the motive was more complicated. I daresay one would find that Sims was descended from a long line of evangelical missionaries," Nigel added inconsequentially.

Michael stared. "Why, his grandfather was a missionary in China, I know that. But what on earth——?"

"It fits in. Missionaries are and always have been the most intolerant people on the face of the earth. They have to be, I suppose," Nigel broke off and apparently lapsed into reverie.

"You know, if you'd lived in ancient Greece, the Delphic oracle would have had to go out of business. Do cut out the cryptic stuff; we're simply itching to hear all about it. Begin at the beginning, go to the end, and there we may allow you to take a breath."

"The beginning? That would take too long. It began before Sims was born." Nigel fumbled in a pocket and drew out some sheets of paper. "The early Christian fathers sowed a new instinct in the heart of man, and it was watered by their spiritual heirs, the Puritans. Instinct is not the right word, I know, but that fear and hatred of the body is so strong and pervasive, one can scarcely give it any other name. It comes out in all of us at times, often in the most curious forms, and with Sims it was a sleeping volcano. We've found a secret diary he kept during the last two months; the superintendent let me make extracts from it. Extraordinarily interesting for an alienist's case-book." He waved the sheets of paper vaguely in the air.

"When does the lecture finish? I'm going out for a drink."

"Now, now; am I conducting this case or are you? Control yourself, old boy, control yourself," said Nigel coldly.

"You *are* sweet," Hero exclaimed suddenly, full in Nigel's face. He looked startled, then smiled delightfully back at her.

"Oi! Oi! This has got to stop! You can't talk like that to every stray male you meet," protested Michael.

"Stray male to you, sir. That's just what Sims wrote in his diary—'this has got to stop,' I mean. You see, he had seen you and Hero making love to each other; he deliberately followed you and watched you after a bit. It was a kind of self-torture to him, I expect, but he kept whipping up his Puritan blood like that till in the end he believed himself the instrument of God to punish the sinner. That's why he tried to throw the guilt of the murders on you. It's all in this diary of his, but I don't think I'll read out those bits; he's terribly outspoken on the subject, and there's nothing quite so nasty as the Puritan's fascinated horror of sex, when he finds words for it."

"Good Lord! Good Lord! the poor devil," Michael said slowly, with strange compassion in his voice.

"But I don't understand," said Hero, "how could he have spied on us? Surely we would have seen him? And we weren't as blatant as all that."

"He did, anyway. You'll understand in a minute how he was able to. It's a terrifying thought; that mild, insignificant-looking little man going about with a positive hell of disgust in his heart, fanning the flames with the images of his own furious imagination—horrible. But there's no use us being morbid, too. I'll get on with it and read some extracts from the diary."

Nigel began to read:

"*May 9th.* In Batford woods again. Chiff-chaff, willow-warbler, wood-warbler, white throat, several tree-creepers; the bullfinches; the redstarts' nest finished. A lovely day—warblers and woodlarks in full song—like Eden—'where every prospect pleases and only man is vile'—E. and his whore here again—the serpent of sin in the garden—wanton—filthy——"

"And then there's a good deal of plain speaking and—er—detail, which may be omitted," said Nigel.

"So that's how he found out," whispered Michael slowly, "bird-watching . . . his field-glasses, of course."

"Yes," replied Nigel, "and that's how *I* found out—or rather, how the possibility first entered my head."

"Meaning——?"

"That conversation you told me about. In Tiverton's room after the first murder. Don't you remember? Sims saw a yellow-bottomed gorse-tit or something, so we had to stop while he stalked it. . . . And talking of birds, where's Wrench? Stalking the fair Rosa, I expect. And then the scene Sims made about that—people behaving like animals—quite a militant outburst, you told me."

"But he was drunk. He'd just had a few with Gadsby."

"Exactly. *In vino veritas.* Repressions pushed aside, timidity left standing, the real man appeared, and his ruling passion, or one of them."

Hero stirred and looked up at Nigel. "But I still don't follow just how that put you on the right track."

"Well. This is taking things out of their right order. Still, the more I looked at the facts, the more one interpretation seemed to emerge. You see, the whole haystack business smelt of stage-management. It was altogether too much of a coincidence that you two and a corpse should visit a haystack within a couple of hours. Armstrong drew the natural inference, that you were the cause of the corpse being there. I, with a possibly misplaced confidence in Michael's freedom from homicidal tendencies, refused to play. There was only one other explanation, that the corpse was the cause of you being there; in other words, that you had been framed."

"Look on this picture and on this," interrupted Michael.

"That will be all from you. So, to cut it short, I had to find out who had it in for you, and why. It was Sims' great mistake, trying to kill two, or rather three, birds with one stone. It gave me a line. The fact that the scene was laid to compromise *both* of you was where Sims fell down. Too ambitious altogether. It narrowed the issue to some one who knew about your being lovers and objected to it. Judging from the madcap way you were behaving, there was nothing to prevent anyone *knowing*. But there seemed no one, except Hero's husband, who would have any reason for objecting. I mean, for letting his objection carry him to such lengths."

"Quite good for a beginner, isn't he, Hero?" said Michael.

"So Percy Vale was the obvious suspect. Yet I couldn't take that. For two reasons. First, the injured husband killing a boy in order to take revenge on his wife and her lover. Too tortuous. Too melodramatic. It simply isn't done. Second, Vale had plenty of money and an assured position; the revenge motive was not likely to be reinforced by a gain motive. Anyway, he wasn't the right type, not for this type of murder. I could imagine him killing from fear—the cornered rat. But not for gain or out of passion. If he knew about you two, his reaction would be self-pity, followed by spite, cruelty, cat and mouse stuff, refusing to allow divorce proceedings—not murder."

Nigel broke off, looking apologetic. "I say, Hero, I'm terribly sorry. You must think me a cold-blooded automaton, going on like this."

"It's all right," smiled Hero. "I don't at all. It's like—well—talking about a dream, or a previous existence. Go on."

"That left me with X. Some one with a motive for killing Wemyss and an equally strong motive for putting you two away. It had to be that, or a most indigestible coincidence. Moreover, it had to be something more than the ordinary conventional objection to 'immorality'; that would have been satisfied by exposing you to Vale. It had to be the kind of frenzied moral indignation which is rooted so often in sexual perversion or frustration. When I heard about Sims' outburst in Tiverton's room, I knew at once he was a possibility. The more so because of his timid, unassertive exterior. Of course I kept my eyes open for other candidates; Wrench and Tiverton were both in my mind for a little; Wrench especially, he seemed to have the most likely motive for both murders. I admit I was at first as badly beaten as the superintendent by the simplicity of Sims' motive. But the diary comes in useful here."

He began reading again.

"June 12th. A queer thing happened to-day. In form. Wemyss had played a most vicious and unpardonable trick on me. They are all against me—boys, masters, every one. Every one always has been. But he is the worst. And now I know why. Now I know what I have got to do. I thought I was going to faint. As though my head was going to burst. Then it was like some obstacle there being swept away, like a log-jam breaking up. Everything became quite clear. It was funny I didn't see it before. The boy has a devil, of course. It contaminates all around him. I know what I have to do. Kill and spare not, saith the Lord. And I am his chosen instrument."

There was a long silence in the room, as though a visitor from a different world had entered. Then Michael spoke, with something like awe in his voice:

"Good God. He was—he must have been a religious maniac, I didn't know they existed—like this, I mean."

"They were common enough not so long ago," said Nigel, "and no one thought of calling them maniacs. Many of the Old Testament prophets, all the inquisitors, were made like that." He turned to the diary. "I'll pass over the next few entries. They are rather appalling reading. You can see his feeling about Wemyss and his feeling about you two converging, till they met and the explosion came. But here's an interesting passage, showing another aspect of his psychological structure."

"June 16th. If only they knew what they had in their midst, what I really am! The drunkard Gadsby; the lecher Evans; Tiverton, with his damned patronising airs—if they only knew! And you, Percival Vale, pedant and cuckold, you'd change your tone pretty quick. But I'll show them. Which of them would dare to contemplate what I am contemplating, or to do what I shall do? And I'll do it before all their eyes. But I must wait for guidance, for the appointed time. I will be patient, I can afford to wait, they will not escape me. I don't mind now that they will never know—not till I'm dead and my Doomsday Book is brought to

light. I shall have given life and I shall have taken away. I shall have ruled their lives in secret. That will be my present satisfaction."

Nigel paused. "That explains everything, really. You weren't there when he delivered his own funeral oration; it was on the same lines. You see, even his religious mania was not the fundamental thing. In fact, it was not much more than a rationalisation, the way his murderer's state of mind justified itself to him. No; at the bottom of the heap we find that old chestnut, the inferiority complex. Subject for newspaper symposium, 'Can a worm turn? Mr. Nigel Strangeways, the celebrated vermicologist, says "Yes." ' But seriously. Didn't Cleopatra call her asp a worm? Anyway, the serpent is the perfect symbol of inferiority feeling; for ever humbled in the dust, trodden under foot, despised, nursing its venom secretly, deadly when goaded into action."

Hero spoke, rather shakily, "You know, I don't think I can bear any more of that diary. Won't you tell us your part in the business instead?"

"Very well. Sims was my chief suspect. The opinion I began to form of his character and the conclusion I was gradually compelled to adopt as regards the time and method of Wemyss' murder, fitted together. After a bit it became evident, by a process of elimination, that he must have been killed while the 440 was being run. Now it's perfectly true that, at moments of great emotional stress—an exciting race, for instance—every one's attention is likely to be wholly absorbed in the spectacle before their eyes. But no ordinary murderer would take the risk of there being no exceptions to the rule. Ergo, the murderer was extraordinary, mentally deranged. Secondly, apart from the risk, there was the fantastic nature of the setting. There must have been a hundred other ways in which a murderer could get rid of Wemyss and involve you two. But he chose the most public, the most theatrical. It was a clear case of exhibitionism, and the inferiority-ridden person often tends to be exhibitionist in action. Other points in favour—no use for a jury, of course—Sims' asking to be relieved of the stop-watch, and his behaviour after the race."

"Good lord," interrupted Michael, "when he came up to me, all worked-up and excited and breathless, it was——"

"Yes. It was not what you supposed. He had popped back into the haystack, strangled the wretched boy, tied a cord round his throat to make certain and returned. Quick action and liable to impart an air of excitement to the agent, but by no means impossible. In fact, not so foolhardy as it sounds. He probably walked backwards, so that he would notice if any one in the crowd turned round, and he was sheltered from all other sides. If he had seen some one turn round and observe him, he could simply go into the haystack, lug the boy out and ask him what the hell he was doing there. As in the second murder, there was nothing in his actions to rouse suspicion till the very moment of killing."

"Hold up a minute. We haven't mastered the first problem yet, sir. How on earth did he know Hero and I were going to the haystack, and how did he get Wemyss there?"

"That's easy. You must remember he had been trailing you about for some time. He discovered Hero used the loose brick for a pillar-box; he saw her put a note there that night—the night before the sports—took it out and read it. That was his cue. He sent off a Black Spot summons the next morning to Wemyss." Nigel explained the procedure and gave a restrained account of how he had stumbled upon it; the episode of the brazen "nimph" still gave him prickly heat to remember.

"And my silver pencil?"

"The diary doesn't mention it. It was probably just your bad luck, not his stage-property. I asked several of them about it, by the way. Tiverton thought he had seen you using it after the hay battle—his mistake. Sims was noncommittal; I supposed that was his cunning; it would have been a little too obvious if he had sworn to seeing you using it just before the murder. But apparently it was just ignorance. Oh, and I was forgetting. I also announced my discovery of the workings of the Black Spot to several of your fellow-beaks. Sims almost immediately drew the connection between it and the method used to get Wemyss into the haystack. Wrench, who is more intelligent, was definitely slower off the mark. That was one up to Sims; it diverted some of my suspicion temporarily to Wrench. A good double bluff."

Nigel paused, and gazed pathetically into the empty teapot. Hero, affecting not to notice this, said:

"By the way, did you find anything out about that note to James Urquhart."

"Oh yes. That's all in the diary. It was just a second line of defence supposing you two somehow wriggled out of suspicion. Sims had been to dinner with him several times, noticed the disparity between his apparent expenditure and his presumed income, and drew the same inference as Armstrong did. He typed the note on Michael's typewriter, so that suspicion was neatly contrived to fall either on Michael or Urquhart. If Urquhart kept the note, Michael would be in the soup; if he destroyed it, he automatically became a suspect himself; the police would be bound to question whether it had ever existed. Of course, the whole plan had to be thought out at lightning speed. He found Hero's note on the night of the nineteenth, read it immediately after she had put it behind the loose brick, and at once sent off the note to Urquhart, so that it reached him by the morning post. He must have stayed awake into the small hours, working out the other details."

"So you had Sims marked down quite early on?"

"Yes. I hadn't really much doubt. Not after I'd heard of his outbreak about sex, and seen the kind of reading he favoured—evangelical divines, hell fire, and so on—to back it up. But I hadn't any proof either, not a stitch of it, to clothe my shameless skeleton of theorising. In fact, he'd probably be alive now but for his vanity——"

"What on earth——?"

"Don't you see? A repressed character, all shut in on himself, no confidantes. What does a person like that do? Keep a diary, ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Same character commits a brilliant, daring exhibitionist murder; asserts himself at last, but he can't ask any one to give him credit for it. What does he do again? Puts it down in the diary. The unrecognised genius. At any rate, it will be published after his death. Posterity will recognise him. Oh yes, I'd banked on that diary, but I couldn't think where the devil he kept it. You see, the police searched all the masters' rooms after the first murder, and they don't miss things. Of course, it was the old protective colouring trick again. Had me beat. You remember that story of Poe's—the important letter hidden in the letter-rack, staring every one in the face while they tore carpets up and panelling down——"

"Will you stop this meandering," Michael interrupted. "We don't want an informative talk on American literature. We shall expire if you don't tell us this instant where it was."

"Keep calm! News is coming. It was an ordinary school exercise book—his Black Book. He kept a tally of his impositions in it, too."

"But do you mean to say he carried this keg of dynamite about with him, brought it into class, and into the Common Room? Why, it's crazy."

"Well, he was crazy. More things than perfect love can cast out all fear. And it was all of a piece with the two murders. Wildly risky, on the face of it; but actually safeguarded from every point, so to speak, except the frontal attack, the red-handed discovery. And of course the fact that it was in shorthand made it pretty safe in your ill-educated community. I got on to it first when I went into his class-room to ask about the pencil. He made an involuntary movement towards his pile of books, as though he wanted to cover one of them up. It gave me an impression of guiltiness. Then I remembered the tiff between Gadsby and Tiverton, about the sacrosanctity of masters' lockers in the Common Room, and it occurred to me that would be a good place for him to keep the diary. A damned sight too good in fact. I couldn't poke about in them during the day for there always seemed to be some one in the Common Room, and he had the sense to bring it up to bed with him at night and, anyhow, it was still only a vague notion in the back of my mind. I didn't feel certain I was right about this till just after Vale was killed. Armstrong said they'd just searched the Common Room; that was a nasty jolt for Sims, he looked sick as death. Every one thought it was reaction from the murder, but it was chiefly reaction to the horrid thought that they might have found his silent friend. He needn't have got so bothered about it, if he'd thought twice, of course. They were looking for a weapon, not a full signed confession."

"How did you get hold of it?" asked Hero.

"That will transpire in due course, ma'am," said Nigel, and went on to the murder of the headmaster and the final discovery of the weapon. "I must confess I ought to have been able to stop that. But I was looking for his next move in the wrong direction. I thought it would be against one of you, if he made it at all. Yet the motive had been right under my nose. I had heard Vale giving him the most devastating ticking-off. Remember thinking to myself, 'I'd crack his head for him if he spoke to me like that.' That's the sort of thing all of us say, but only a Sims puts into practice. Vale had been browbeating and patronising him for years, but this was the point at which Sims boiled over. He probably was also afraid that Vale might sack him for incompetence. But he might never have gone to the lengths of murdering him, if it hadn't suggested to him a magnificent way of incriminating you. Yes, he really struck the top of his form there," Nigel added enthusiastically.

"So glad you enjoyed it," murmured Michael in society-hostess tones.

"It was more brilliant even than the first murder, and absolutely safe except for the moment of impact. At the crisis of the match he bent down, as if to do up his shoelace, snatched out the tent-peg dagger with his left hand, struck through the back of the deck chair, you get no spurt of blood with a very thin weapon like that, wiped the dagger on the grass, and thrust it back through the loop of the guy-rope. The whole thing would take three seconds. If there had been no really exciting point in the match to distract every one's attention, he simply would not have acted; just substituted a real tent-peg that night and no one any the wiser. As he says in the diary, he could afford to wait. He knew, of course, where Hero and her husband would be sitting. He could rely on Michael being somewhere near. He didn't know, on the other hand, that Hero would faint; that was his greatest triumph of tactics. The original plan was for him in some unobtrusive way to call the attention of the police to the tent-peg, a few hours after the murder. Its proximity to Hero's chair, plus the motive she had for getting rid of her husband, would have clinched the case for the police. When she fainted, he altered this plan in a twinkling, called out 'Fetch some water,' a perfectly innocent remark on the face of it, knowing that knight-errant Evans would hurry off for some, and at once be suspected of carrying the weapon with him. If the police had stopped him, searched him and found no weapon, then Sims could fall back on the first plan. Oh yes, the whole performance was alpha plus. His mania had sharpened his intelligence to a very fine point indeed."

Nigel paused. Hero shivered a little, moved closer to Michael. Even in retrospect these things kept the edge of horror. She looked at Nigel. His dispassionate, scientific admiration for the methods of a killer frightened her. His face seemed inhuman to her at this moment, like a clever machine in repose after a day's work. She shook herself. This was a nice way to feel towards some one who had saved her life and Michael's.

"You haven't answered my question yet," she said.

"What? Oh, the diary? Yes, it was very difficult. I still hadn't a vestige of material proof that Sims was the murderer. And Armstrong was beginning to tug pretty hard at the leash. I couldn't give him any reasons that would be satisfactory to him for holding Sims. So I asked him to arrest you, just to keep him quiet, and to keep Sims quiet too, of course. The diary was an hypothesis; I determined to try and prove it. The trouble was, Sims might very well have realised that it was a luxury he couldn't afford now, and burnt it. If he hadn't, he'd be pretty sure to keep strict guard over it. Anyway, Griffin, young Stevens and I staged a fire-alarm. That got Sims and every one else out of the Common Room without arousing suspicion. The diary *was* there, in his locker. Half a minute at it, and I knew we had won." Nigel's voice changed. "Poor devil. None of us can have the remotest idea of the agony it is to be despised and rejected of men; a cancer in the soul. And then madness; the feeling of there being a curtain, more invisible than gauze, stronger than iron, between oneself and one's fellow men. To cry out of the abyss, and to know that there will be no answer, that one is buried alive."

Hero whispered involuntarily. "So you are human, after all."

Nigel started, and looked puzzled, "What on earth——" he said slowly.

"I think I understand," said Michael. Then, with seeming irrelevance, "Do you always leave your revolver under your pillow? Careless habit. You should break yourself of it."

"I see there is no getting past you," answered Nigel. "And for goodness' sake don't let this go past you. I should be ruined if Armstrong got to hear of it. He can't understand how a detective of my calibre should make such an almighty gaffe as to announce in front of a murderer exactly where he keeps a revolver——"

"What's this?" asked Hero. "Was it your revolver he shot himself with?"

"Yes. I can tell you, Armstrong is pretty sore about that. He'd be a damn sight sorer if he knew—oh well, I'd better explain. Armstrong imagines that Sims noticed his diary was missing, knew everything was up, and took advantage of my alleged carelessness with firearms to stage a grand finale. Actually it wasn't as simple as that. I'm not so tired of life yet as to leave my revolver about in reach of murderers. And Sims did not miss his diary till I told him I'd read it; I placed a notebook of the same pattern in his locker, when I took the diary, and he hadn't had time to discover the substitution. I had no intention of letting him get away with suicide then, not till I read the diary; then—well—my views changed. I knew he would not be hung with that evidence before a judge; he'd be sent to Broadmoor. And I simply have no use for keeping lunatics alive, criminal or otherwise. So I had a chat with Sims; told him it was all up, and where I kept my revolver—*not* under my pillow, I may say—and left him to it. He—no, I think I will not describe the interview in detail. Anyway, I took every one off to reconstruct the first crime. That was really for my own satisfaction. I wanted to prove that he could have moved to the haystack and back during the race without being noticed, and—er—I like a little exhibition now and then. I intended, of course, to play the part of the murderer myself. You can imagine it shook me up all right when I saw, just before we kicked off, that Sims himself had turned up. I'd only left one shot in the revolver. But it looked as if he might propose to fire it into the wrong person. I was just on the point of jumping on him when it occurred to me that what he had come for was not my life but a triumphal exit. It was rather rash of me, I suppose, but I staked on my knowledge of his mental processes, and luckily I was right.

We went ahead; Sims re-enacted his own part, and had his crowded hour of glorious life, and here we all are."

"Well, you've certainly got a nerve," said Michael.

"I don't know how we begin to thank you," Hero said gently.

"A fresh pot of tea would be quite a good start."

THERE'S TROUBLE BREWING

To
Joyce and Teddy

All the characters, places and business firms in this book are entirely fictitious. My best thanks are due to H. Sandeman Allen, Esq., F. W. Hands, Esq., and K. Mead, Esq., for assistance on technical points.

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Chapter I

April 23, July 16

Dogs begin in jest and end in earnest.

PROVERB

Every dog, they say, has its day. Whether Truffles would have assented to this proposition during his lifetime is highly doubtful. Not for him the elusive rabbit, the ineffable dungheap, the hob-nobbing with loose companions at street corners that for upper-class dogs represent the illicit high-spots of cloistered lives. Truffles, like everything else that Eustace Bunnett had to do with, was kept very much at heel. One might have supposed that a wife, a brother, a brewery and a town council would have provided Mr. Bunnett with sufficient exercise for his lust for power. But that would be to underestimate both the late (though far from lamented) Eustace Bunnett and that most insidious of human vices of which Edmund Burke said so justly, "Power gradually extirpates from the mind every humane and gentle virtue." No, Truffles had a dog's life, in every possible sense of the phrase. Even the natural and almost boundless servility of his species must have been pretty heavily strained by the demands of his master.

Yet Truffles, too, had his day. Whether it was adequate compensation for a lifetime of alternate whipping and pampering, I cannot pretend to decide. At least it ended in posthumous fame; and posthumous fame is no doubt the next best thing to a happy life. Truffles achieved the ambition of all downtrodden creatures. His pusillanimous and shifty-looking terrier face appeared in every illustrated newspaper in the United Kingdom, ousting from the front page the not altogether dissimilar features of Hitler, the neurotic-bulldog expression of Mussolini, the sealed lips of Mr. Baldwin, and the unconcealed charms of bathing beauties. In death, as in life, Truffles and his master were not divided. Side by side with the dog's face appeared that of Eustace Bunnett—the petulant mouth, the pince-nez which only called attention to the cold and self-satisfied eyes, the whole expression of meanness, suavity, self-importance, and latent ruthlessness. And as for the headlines!

But we anticipate, as the small boy said when he was sick on Christmas Eve. When Nigel Strangeways received the invitation, he naturally had no inkling of the sinister circumstances in which it was going to involve him. Had he had such an inkling, he would have accepted the invitation with much more alacrity: Nigel would go anywhere if a problem in crime was promised, whereas he would normally have run miles to avoid a literary society—and it was to address the Maiden Astbury Literary Society that he had been invited. Here is the letter, filed by him later as exhibit one in the Bunnett case:

3, Pound Street, Maiden Astbury, Dorset

> DEAR MR. STRANGEWAYS,—*As secretary of the local literary society (a poor thing, but our own!), I am venturing to ask whether you would come down and give us an address. We have been studying your delightful little book on the Caroline poets, and our members are all eager to have the privilege of meeting its author. The desire to "see Shelley plain" is a very human failing, after all, and perhaps will excuse the presumption of this request. I know how busy you writers are, but I'm sure you would feel recompensed by our enthusiasm. I'm afraid we cannot offer you a fee: I expect the funds could rise to your expenses, though, if necessary! Do come if you can—any date in June or July would suit us.—Yours sincerely,*
>
> SOPHIE CAMMISON
>
> P.S.—*We live in the middle of the Hardy country.*
>
> P.P.S.—*My husband met you at Oxford, and would be so glad to renew the acquaintance.*

"Crikey!" said Nigel, inspecting this communication bleakly over his early morning cup of tea. "This is what comes of dabbling in literature. Why ever didn't I stick to the straight path of crime?"

"What comes of dabbling in literature?" asked Georgia from the adjoining bed.

"Oh, *you're* there. You know, I just can't get used to waking up and finding a woman in the room."

"It's a damn sight better than waking up and finding a fer-de-lance in the room, and that's what happened when I——"

"Spare us the reminiscences, please. Keep them for *Three Thousand*

Miles Through the Bush on a Tricycle, or whatever you're going to call your travel book."

"You're sweet. I'm glad I married you," said Georgia.

"Well, you go instead then."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"This," said Nigel, holding up the letter. "Some dastardly hag wants me to go down to Dorset and address her blasted literary society. A literary society! I ask you."

"Let me see." Georgia took the letter.

"Note the skittishness," said Nigel. "Sophie clearly has rather protuberant eyes of a washed-out violet colour, and spits at you when she talks. Her friends say, 'Poor Sophie is so artistic, you know!' She is the type of virgin that——"

"What's all this about 'virgin'? Her postscript says she is married."

"Oh, I hadn't got that far. Anyway, I never read postscripts—either they're unnecessary or they've got a catch in them."

"Well, it's a post-postscript, actually. The PS. says they live in the middle of the Hardy country."

"A fact already adequately communicated by the address at the top of the page."

"The PPS. says her husband knew you at Oxford."

Nigel sat up in bed. "Ah, now that *is* interesting."

"You remember him?"

"Yes, vaguely. I don't mean that, though. What's interesting is the fact that this frolicsome hag only mentions him in a postscript. She is evidently jealous about him and henpecks him unmercifully, at the same time telling all her girl friends that Herbert has no soul and does not understand her. Her mission is to bring culture, spiritual values and whatnot into Herbert's life—and, if I remember anything about him, she's undertaken a pretty tough job. Still, she's probably got him down by now. Wives always do."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't believe a word of it. I'll lay you evens that Sophie Cammison is a highly intelligent woman with a figure as well developed as her sense of humour. She wrote this letter with her tongue in her cheek, and she's pulled your leg right out of its socket."

"How anatomical you are," said Nigel. "So you expect me to go down there without a fee—the funds could rise to expenses, exclamation mark—just to win a beggarly quid off you?"

"Not win, lose."

"Very well, that settles it. I'll go, just to prove you're wrong. It'll be interesting to see how old Cammison has turned out, too."

"Ah, the human interest always gets you, doesn't it? You're the editor's dream come true." Georgia wrinkled up her nose at him.

"Now that I come to look at you in the cold light of morning, you really are exactly like a monkey," said Nigel.

"Darling Nigel!"

"Well, only fairly like a monkey. A literary society! Human interest! Pah!"

But indeed that absurd bet with Georgia was to lead Nigel into a very great deal more human interest than he could possibly have bargained for. . . .

As the train puffed through the lush July landscape of Dorset, Nigel took out Mrs. Cammison's letter again. He was feeling more reconciled to the visit. Georgia, whose odd craving for the most solitary and uncomfortable parts of the world had won her fame as an explorer, was off wandering amongst the outer Hebrides. So he might as well be in Dorset as anywhere else—even if it was to involve him in reverent pilgrimages to Mellstock and Egdon Heath with the kittenish Cammison creature. For there could be no doubt that Georgia was wrong there. Sophie Cammison, Nigel reflected as he studied her letter again, would be one of those kittens that keeps a very useful set of claws concealed behind her playful pattings: she was the sort of woman who had to be bossing something; if it wasn't a literary society, it would be flag-day committees, the Women's Conservative League, Rescue and Prevention, the Society for the Preservation of Home Crafts, Country Dancing, or some other of those innumerable activities that give idle women a pretext for interfering with other people's lives. Well, she was not going to get her claws into him.

In due course a ramshackle station bus bore Nigel up the steep, narrow main road of the little Dorset town and deposited him outside 3, Pound Street. It was a solid, dignified little house, its Ham Hill stone glowing apricot in the evening sunlight. A brass plate on the door read "Herbert Cammison, F.R.C.S." Of course: Nigel remembered now that Cammison had been studying medicine: in his youth he had been just the moody, wild, cynical type of lad that by some incredible alchemy turns out a model of professional etiquette and bedside manner. No doubt the Herbert Cammison who one night had strung every chamber-pot in college on a rope over the quadrangle was now incapable of saying boo! to a stethoscope. *Tempora mutantur,* murmured Nigel as he crossed the threshold, *nos et mutamur in illis.* The hall was dark, cool, stone-flagged. The maid took his suitcase and showed him into the drawing-room. Nigel's determination to show Sophie Cammison at the outset that he did not stand any nonsense was badly wrecked. Failing to notice the two steps that led down into the room, he fell into her presence rather than arrived. As he picked himself up, blinking in the strong light, he heard an amused voice say:

"It's all right. Everybody does that the first time. I'm always telling Grace to warn people."

Nigel shook hands with the owner of the voice. Mrs. Cammison was a robust shapely creature, red-cheeked and blue-eyed, the picture of health: she might have been any age from twenty-five to thirty-five, and looked like a Victorian painter's idea of a milkmaid except for her chic dress and the horn-rimmed spectacles that went so incongruously with her fresh face. Nigel muttered involuntarily:

"I believe Georgia was right after all."

" 'Georgia was right'? That's your wife, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a long and rather discreditable story."

"Do tell me. You can tell me while you're having tea. You haven't had it yet, have you? I'm sorry I couldn't meet you, but Herbert wanted the car this afternoon."

Nigel ate heartily, as always, and Mrs. Cammison regarded him with the amiable satisfaction of a mother who observes that her son has recovered his appetite. After a bit she said:

"Well now, what is this discreditable story?"

"Well, you see," said Nigel, picking his words gingerly, "it was your letter. I—er—formed one opinion from it about what you'd be like, and Georgia formed another."

"It doesn't seem a very long story."

"No, perhaps not. That's because I'm leaving out the er—discreditable details."

"I can imagine them."

"I sincerely hope you can't. But seriously, you're not a bit like your letter."

Sophie Cammison's eyes twinkled. She replied comfortably:

"And you're not a bit like a celebrated amateur detective."

"Oh, dear," said Nigel disconcerted. "You know about that?"

"I read the newspapers. They were full of you last year over that Chatcombe case.* That was when you met your wife, wasn't it?"

"Yes. What do you think an amateur detective ought to look like?"

"I'll tell you that if you tell me first what you thought *I* was going to look like."

"Well, on your own head be it," Nigel told her. Mrs. Cammison threw back her head and laughed with hearty enjoyment. No man is quite invulnerable against a woman's laughter, when she is laughing at his ideas—even if the ideas are only half serious. A little piqued, Nigel said:

"Why did you write such a misleading letter, then? You've lost me a quid over it."

"Oh, I just thought it was the sort of style that would appeal to a writer. If he was a fool, I mean, it would flatter his vanity: if he wasn't, he'd see through it."

"And I didn't see through it, therefore——"

"Oh, I didn't mean that—really, I didn't," exclaimed Mrs. Cammison, flushing deeply. It made her look a little overblown, a little stupid. But she isn't stupid really, thought Nigel: her physical self-confidence has made it unnecessary for her to learn finesse: she is sophisticated in her intelligence, but ingenuous at heart. Clever—the letter shows it—in a superficial, mischievous way, like an ape. Probably a good mimic.

He said, "Now it's your turn to expose your misconceptions."

"Well, I suppose my idea of a detective is based on Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown and Poirot."

"A curious composite figure he must be! Long and short, fat and thin——"

"Now don't interrupt. He has piercing eyes, that see exactly what you are thinking. He is always making sinister deductions from one's most innocent remarks. And of course he's wildly eccentric. Are you wildly eccentric?"

"It's very difficult: some of my friends complain that I'm too eccentric, others that I'm not eccentric enough."

"You look quite ordinary to me."

Nigel, who prided himself normally on his unobtrusive appearance, now found himself faintly resenting this remark. Really, it's strange the way this artless creature gets beneath my skin, he reflected: perhaps because everything she says is so transparently honest. He was driven, as a sort of self-assertion against this downrightness of hers, to adopt a flippant tone.

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* c.f. *Thou Shell of Death.*

"And how is crime in these parts? Have you any nice murders for me to solve? Or a spot of blackmail, perhaps? I am always willing to oblige."

There was the slightest pause. Then Sophie Cammison said:

"Oh, no, I'm afraid not. We're a very law-abiding lot. By the way, Mr. Bunnett is coming round after the meeting, and one or two others. He is anxious to meet you. I hope you don't mind."

Actually, Nigel minded a good deal. It is one of the impositions, however, that an author has to put up with—this "one or two people coming round after the meeting" and bombarding him with questions, opinions and manuscripts when he is already reeling with fatigue. Nigel said politely that it would be a pleasure. So that was that.

It was only when he was dressing for dinner an hour later that this conversation returned to Nigel's mind. There was something in it that had bothered him. What? Mrs. Cammison had talked about detectives "making sinister deductions from one's most innocent remarks." That was quite true, of course: and still more true of pauses, hesitations in answering a question. Ah, now he'd got it! There had been a slight but quite unnecessary pause after his flippant remark about "crime in these parts." And then, when Sophie had answered, "Oh, no, I'm afraid not"; her voice had been almost too normal—as though she were consciously mimicking her own normal voice. Then she had abruptly changed the subject. Of course, she *was* abrupt. It was her natural manner. But Nigel believed that, when a person deliberately changes the subject, there is often an unconscious association between the original subject and the new one. Still, it was difficult to see any connection between crime and a few people coming round after the meeting, apart from the criminal act of subjecting a jaded author to such an ordeal. One person was mentioned by name—who was it now? Oh, yes, a Mr. Bunnett. A relation, perhaps, of the composer of Bunnett's "Magnificat in F," or whatever the key was, so beloved of ambitious village choirs.

As it happened, the mysterious Mr. Bunnett's name cropped up at dinner, though in a context very far removed from church music. Nigel was a firm believer in first impressions. He thought that you could find out more about a person in the first ten minutes than in the next ten days, because then the mind was unprejudiced, the intuition like a smooth wax tablet ready to take a clear imprint. So, while he sipped his sherry and talked trivialities with Mrs. Cammison, he was closely observing her and her husband. It was not easy to recognise in this swarthy, taciturn doctor the harum-scarum undergraduate of ten years ago. Cammison's face was peculiarly unrevealing, his voice quiet and non-committal. Two vertical furrows above his nose might indicate worry or concentration. There was a sort of stealthiness about his movement, like a cat's, and at the same time a suggestion of perfect nervous co-ordination. His hands were very quiet and very sensitive—a surgeon's hands. They seemed to handle knife, fork and glass of their own volition, as though they could go on working if their owner was asleep or dead. Nigel only saw Herbert Cammison smile once during dinner and that was at his wife during a lull in the conversation: it was a smile of curious warmth and complicity.

The relations between these two were obviously of the best. There was none of that slightly petulant, semi-affectionate verbal sparring in which ill-assorted couples are apt to indulge before strangers. Nor did they compete with each other at all for their guest's attention. Nigel was wondering idly why Sophie Cammison, with her dark hair and high colouring, wore such insipid pastel shades instead of something more crude and barbaric, when the name of Bunnett cropped up. Cammison had asked him would he have beer or whisky. Nigel chose beer. As he fingered the bottle, he saw it was labelled. "BUNNETT'S BREWERY, MAIDEN ASTBURY, DORSET."

"Is this something to do with the man I'm meeting tonight?" he asked, and was instantly aware of a tension in the atmosphere, a guarded deliberation in the way Mrs. Cammison answered:

"Yes, he owns the local brewery." She went on quickly and smoothly, "Mr. Bunnett wanted to meet Mr. Strangeways, so I asked him with a few others to come round after the meeting."

"Oh," said Herbert Cammison. "I see."

On the face of it, one couldn't imagine two more ordinary remarks: but Nigel somehow felt that Mrs. Cammison's tone implied, "Don't show surprise, Herbert: leave me to manage this," and her husband's answer a more than superficial acquiescence.

"Well," said Cammison in his usual sombre tones, "here's luck." He raised his glass and waggled his little finger at Nigel—a gesture that suddenly bridged the gulf between Oxford and Maiden Astbury. "I wonder are we drinking Truffles to-night," he added.

"Drinking truffles?" asked Nigel in amazement.

"Herbert!" Mrs. Cammison remonstrated. "Don't be so disgusting! Anyway, that brew wouldn't have matured yet."

"I don't mind. It would add body," said Herbert equably.

"What on earth is all this about? An old Dorset recipe?"

"Not exactly," Cammison answered. "Truffles fell into one of the open coppers a week or two ago. Eustace Bunnett's dog. A happy release for the abominable little beast, I should call it. Bunnett made the hell of a to-do about it, I believe."

"A happy release?"

"Yes," said Cammison crisply. "I suspect Eustace Bunnett of sadist tendencies. Amongst other things."

"Herbert!" his wife exclaimed. It was something more than the conventional "shocked" expostulation.

Herbert replied grimly:

"Well, perhaps 'suspect' is the wrong word. We all know——"

"Do you mind people asking questions after your address?" Sophie interrupted hastily. Nigel grimaced.

"That's part of the bargain, I'm afraid," he said.

When dinner was over they walked along to the hall. It was a dusty, fusty, depressing place, smelling of varnish and stewed tea—the centre, Nigel imagined, of all Maiden Astbury's more gruesome activities, from jumble sales to inquests. The intelligentsia, so to speak, of the town was already assembled. Nigel was introduced to a strapping great woman of aggressively civic aspect who might have sat, suitably draped, for a statue of the Goddess of Public Works ("this is Miss Mellors, our president"), and followed in her wake up to the dais. The Goddess of Public Works breathed heavily on him, took out a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, liberally lustrated herself and boomed at Nigel:

"Glad you could come. Good turn-out to-night. Feeling nervous?"

"Paralysed. However, I've fortified myself with some of your Mr. Bunnett's excellent booze. Good stuff, isn't it?"

"Indeed? 'Good' is not the word I should apply myself. I am vice-president of the Blue Ribbon Society. We aim to stamp out liquor-drinking."

"Oh," said Nigel, reflecting that anything Miss Mellors stamped on would stand little chance of survival. He fidgeted with his notes and began to scrutinise the audience. Lower-middlebrow, he decided, was the prevailing tendency: he began to wonder whether a lecture on the post-war poets was quite their dish of tea. Still, it was too late to do anything about it now. The front row was occupied, reading from left to right, by two ladies with ear-trumpets huge as cornucopias; a small boy sucking a lollipop and looking mutinous, as well he might be, Nigel considered, after being dragged to a party like this; a bucolic woman—his mother, presumably, who looked as if she would be more at home with fatstock prices than with sprung rhythm; an old gentleman with hand already cupped expectantly to ear; two nuns; three empty chairs; a beaming curate.

"Do—er—all these people belong to the Literary Society?" he asked Miss Mellors timidly.

"Oh, no. We threw the meeting open to the public. Coffee and sandwiches are being provided afterwards."

"Oh," thought Nigel, "so that accounts for it. She might have put it a little more tactfully, though. Bread and circuses, with me figuring as the circus, I suppose."

"Only respectable people are admitted, of course," said Miss Mellors.

"Of course."

As Miss Mellors rose to introduce him—in words that were neither few nor remarkably well-chosen, Nigel resumed his study of the audience. His eye was attracted by a gentleman in the third row who was regarding him coldly through a pair of pince-nez: Nigel took an instant dislike to him; his roundish face and small, petulant mouth contrasted disagreeably with something mean, ascetic and arrogant in the eyes. Without removing his gaze from Nigel, the man made a remark to a faded, pathetic-looking little woman by his side, twisting his mouth towards her contemptuously. She looked up at him as she answered, the white of her eyes showing in an expression horribly fawning and docile—as though she were his dog. Some distance behind, Nigel caught sight of his host and hostess, Herbert unsmiling, self-contained as ever, his wife grinning mischievously at Nigel. Away to the right sat a young man in a stained tweed coat, a khaki shirt, and side-whiskers, manifestly trying to dissociate himself from the whole proceedings. The contemptuous pout of his lips reminded Nigel vaguely of somebody—who could it be, now? Beside him sat another young man, who appeared to be already asleep: "the local press, no doubt," said Nigel to himself. Miss Mellors was whipping herself up to her peroration, speaking in an affected mimsy sort of voice that she reserved presumably for cultural pronouncements: Nigel preferred her normal, unmitigated boom.

". . . and I am sure we all feel privileged to have such a distinguished author with us to-night. Mr. Strangeways' fame in another field is well known to us. No doubt, as an eminent detective, he will be able to give us some clues as to this modern poetry, and I feel sure that most of us need them. Ha! ha!" ("Hear, hear!" unexpectedly roared the old gentleman with his hand cupped to his ear.) "Well, you have not come here to listen to me, so without more ado I will call upon Mr. Nigel Strangeways to give us his delightful lecture. Mr. Strangeways."

Nigel rose and gave them his delightful lecture. . . .

When it was over, and the coffee and sandwich binge had ended, Miss Mellors called for questions.

A gentleman with a white moustache and mottled complexion instantly rose and launched into a philippic against the alleged bolshevist tendencies of the younger poets. His speech ended on a note of interrogation; but as it had contained only rhetorical questions, Nigel had to content himself with replying that there was no doubt a great deal in what the last speaker had said.

A rather pretty young woman got up, blushing, and said that there seemed to her to be no music in modern poetry.

Nigel quoted a number of passages to refute this heresy.

A considerably less pretty young woman, with protruding teeth and a theosophical glint in her eye, asked:

"What about the music of the spheres?"

This was the first question—in the strictly grammatical sense—that Nigel had received: but, as he did not know the answer, he had to remain silent. At this impasse, the young man in the khaki shirt brought relief.

"What is your opinion of surrealism?" he asked truculently.

Nigel translated his opinion of surrealism into comparatively uncensorable language. The young man then showed signs of making a fighting speech, but was quelled simultaneously by a nasty look from Miss Mellors and by the uprising of the gentleman to whom Nigel had taken an instant dislike.

"Mr. Bunnett," said Miss Mellors.

"So *that* is Mr. Bunnett," thought Nigel: "I might have guessed."

All heads turned as the local brewer adjusted his pince-nez and gave a dry cough.

"I don't think," he said in a dry, crackling voice, "that we can profitably concern ourselves with surrealism. We may not be experts on artistic questions"—his little mouth twisted sideways towards the last speaker—"but at least we can recognise stark lunacy when we see it."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed the mottled gentleman.

Mr. Bunnett removed his pince-nez and pointed them at Nigel.

"Now, sir. You were saying, I think, that modern poets feel themselves bound to the truth, to the exploration of reality, however ugly or painful it—and often, I fear, the poetical results too—may be. Now this is my point. You may think me an old fogey, but I read my Tennyson, my

Browning, my—er—Shakespeare, and I don't want reality in my poetry. There is quite enough of it in ordinary life. If I want reality, I look at the butcher's book."

Mr. Bunnett paused meaningly. The faded woman beside him tittered, a signal for polite laughter from the rest of the audience.

"No, sir," proceeded Mr. Bunnett, his voice throbbing, rather as though he had pulled out a vox humana stop; "what I ask the poet for is Beauty: I ask him to make me forget the ugliness and difficulties of this world, to lead me into a fairy garden."

"I am sure, sir," rejoined Nigel in his politest and most non-committal voice, "that no modern poet would wish to lead you up the fairy garden path."

There was an instant of anxious silence, as the audience sought to assess the exact significance of this remark. Then a colder silence set in like the Arctic night, broken only by a sound—which might have been a snore or a snort—from the local press.

"It evidently doesn't do to sauce your Mr. Bunnett in this town," said Nigel as he walked back with Mrs. Cammison to her house.

"No," she replied evenly: "he is highly respected, as they say." Suddenly she began to chuckle, and waggling an imaginary pair of pince-nez at Nigel, rasped in the most exact imitation of Mr. Bunnett's tones:

"I ask the poet to lead me into a fairy garden." Her voice changed. She was saying, half to herself, "A fairy garden. Yes. Perhaps it's not so incongruous. The fairies were malevolent spirits, weren't they?"

Nigel hesitated, decided against the question he would have liked to ask, and said lightly:

"You're a remarkably good mimic."

"Yes, so they tell me. You ought to see this street in moonlight: there are lovely shadows. The full moon is just over, though."

What a queer mixture of straightforward and mysterious this woman was! Her talk of moonlight and shadows for some reason put Brahms' "Sapphic Ode" into Nigel's head. He began to hum it gently. He was still hummimg it when they stopped at the front door and Sophie Cammison put her hand on his arm and said:

"Nigel. Don't sauce Mr. Bunnett any more, will you?"

He had never heard her voice sound more neutral and equable. Nor was there anything in her words to explain the little shiver that ran up his back, as though the spirit of fear itself had laid one icy and deliberate finger upon him.

Five minutes later Mrs. Cammison's comfortable, untidy drawing-room was filled with people. Miss Mellors occupied the greater part of one sofa. Nigel was introduced to Eustace Bunnett and the pathetic-looking woman, his wife; then to the young man in the khaki shirt, Gabriel Sorn; then to several others, whose names he did not catch. Herbert Cammison was attending to the drinks, pouring them out with noticeable dexterity and holding the glasses up to the light as if they were test-tubes. He turned to Miss Mellors, his dark face quite expressionless.

"Whisky, sherry, a cocktail or tomato-juice, Miss Mellors?"

"You naughty man!" she laughed roguishly; "are you trying to make me break the pledge?"

The doctor was evidently a favourite.

"Mrs. Bunnett?"

She started a little, and said breathlessly:

"Oh, me? Sherry. Just a little sherry, please," then looked round apologetically at her husband.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have some ice-water, Emily?" asked Eustace Bunnett in his precise, crackling voice, jingling a bunch of keys in his pocket. There was a moment's embarrassing pause. Then, simultaneously, Dr. Cammison said dourly:

"There is no ice-water," and Emily Bunnett, catching Nigel's eye, flushed painfully and said:

"No, dear, I think I will have some sherry."

Nigel observed a faint contraction of Bunnett's cheek muscles. He wondered how long ago was the last occasion on which Mrs. Bunnett had asserted herself: no doubt she would be made to pay for it later: Nigel found himself disliking the brewer more and more.

For a while the conversation was general. Then Gabriel Sorn came up to Nigel and began talking about surrealism. He talked well. Soon the others were listening. When Sorn realised this, his enthusiastic, rather naïve manner changed. His mouth twisted into a theatrically cynical expression, and he said, "Of course, the advantage of the method is that you are not responsible—not consciously—for anything you create, and therefore you're not open to criticism."

"Aren't you betraying your beliefs now?" asked Nigel gently. The young man gave him a startled, almost respectful glance; then took a gulp at his whisky—he had been drinking pretty heavily—and exclaimed:

"It's not the first time. I spend my life betraying them. Didn't you know that I am the brewery bard?"

Eustace Bunnett took off his pince-nez and opened his mouth, but Sorn forestalled him.

"Oh, yes," he went on wildly, "you must have seen some of my—occasional verses, shall we call them?

'North, south, east and west,
Bunnett's beers are still the best.' "

Eustace Bunnett cut in, his voice suave as ice:

"Mr. Sorn does some of our publicity work, Mr. Strangeways, amongst his—er—other duties."

"Well," said Nigel, "it certainly gives you a public. I'm all for poetry being popular. Get the ordinary man used to the idea of verse—on hoardings, the films, anywhere—and there'll be more chance of his wanting to read serious work."

"I don't agree," said Sorn: "poetry can never be a popular medium again. It will have to appeal to a small circle of highly-trained, sensitive persons. I——"

"Now, Gabriel," Mr. Bunnett interrupted, "we can't have you monopolising our distinguished guest. Run along and talk to Mrs. Cammison."

Sorn's fists clenched. Nigel was terrified for a moment that there might be a scene. Then the young man's shoulders drooped; he kicked the fender childishly and moved away. Mr. Bunnett clearly disapproved of his employees muscling in on the limelight. He now straddled his short legs in front of the fireplace, made a movement with his hands as though straightening an invisible piece of blotting-paper on an imaginary table before him, and said:

"I have a little problem for you, Mr. Strangeways—in your detective rather than your literary capacity."

Nigel received the impression that everyone in the room had been frozen into immobility, in the middle of a word or a gesture: it reminded him of the children's game called "Grandmother's Steps." Mr. Bunnett had his audience where he wanted them.

"Yes," he proceeded, "I am sure it would interest you. A fortnight ago, on the second of this month, to be precise—my fox-terrier, Truffles, disappeared. He was found later when my men were cleaning out one of the open coppers. The flesh, of course, had been all absorbed, but we identified him by the metal tag on his collar."

Eustace Bunnett paused impressively.

"But where do I come in?" asked Nigel.

"I understand that you are interested in crime," said the brewer in a measured, perfectly serious voice: "there is not the least doubt in my mind that THE DOG WAS MURDERED."

The guests, who had been fidgeting a little, were now frozen again. Nigel noticed Dr. Cammison standing rigid with a bottle poised above a glass.

"But," Nigel stammered at last, "but isn't it much more likely that the dog fell into the open copper by accident, chasing a rat or something."

Mr. Bunnett raised a censorious hand.

"If you will allow me to tell you the facts. Truffles accompanied me to the brewery every morning. There was a basket for him in my room, and he was attached to the leg of the chair by a strong steel chain. I had occasion to go out for a few minutes that morning. When I returned, I found that the brute was gone. He had not slipped his collar. Someone had unfastened the catch of the lead."

"Well, granted that was so, you surely don't suspect one of your employees of deliberately stealing the dog and throwing him into the open copper. No doubt someone unleashed him for a joke and he wandered out and met his death accidentally."

"The sides of the open copper in which he was found, Mr. Strangeways, are six foot high, and Truffles was old and very far from active. (No wonder, thought Nigel, after a lifetime on the lead.) I questioned my employees, but could not pin the guilt on anyone."

Eustace Bunnett's voice hushed. His lips scarcely moved as he added:

"I am exceedingly anxious to find out who did it."

Nigel was genuinely appalled by his tones. As though seeking to give the brewer an opportunity for justifying them, he said:

"You were very fond of Truffles?"

"The animal was my property, Mr. Strangeways."

A short silence while the company digested this.

"It seems to me a lot of fuss to make about a dog," said Miss Mellors unexpectedly. "Why didn't you call in the police while you were about it?"

"I did," replied Mr. Bunnett frigidly. "They declared themselves unable to take any action. That is why I am asking Mr. Strangeways."

Nigel surreptitiously pinched himself. Yes, he was awake, incredible as it might seem.

"You wish me to conduct an inquiry?" he said. "But the whole thing is"—he was on the point of saying "utterly farcical," but remembered

Sophie's request that he should not sauce Mr. Bunnett again, and amended it to "most irregular."

Mr. Bunnett smiled at him. At least, a sort of twinkle appeared in his eyes, though his mouth remained singularly mirthless.

"I did not imagine a little 'irregularity,' as you put it, would be any great obstacle to one who declares himself an admirer of modern poetic metres. I am prepared to give you full facilities for questioning my staff, and a free run of the premises, of course. My little problem should help to keep your hand in till your next big murder case turns up."

Mr Bunnett's request was so bizarre that Nigel felt strongly tempted to take it up. But no, it was all too sickening—this dried-up, vindictive creature with his lust for domination.

"I'm afraid, sir, I really can't——"

"Oh, for God's sake do. None of us will get a moment's peace till the thing is cleared up." It was Gabriel Sorn who had interrupted. Nigel heard a heartfelt appeal beneath his repressed, edgy tones.

"Very well, then," he said, "I'll take it on. But I assure you, Mr. Bunnett, that I am still convinced it was an accident."

"I shall be happy if you succeed in convincing me," replied the brewer. "Now, let me see, I shall not be at the brewery to-morrow morning. If you will come along about tea-time, I will meet you and arrange for you to be shown over the place. I don't know whether you accept fees for this sort of thing: I dare say not, but——"

"Twenty-five guineas retaining fee, and a refresher of five guineas a day is my minimum charge."

Mr. Bunnett stared at Nigel incredulously, but Nigel's face was perfectly serious and businesslike.

"Really, Mr. Strangeways, that is a bit—I mean, I had thought of a little honorarium, say——"

"I cannot consider anything less, Mr. Bunnett."

"Oh—er, very well then."

It was the first time Nigel had seen Eustace Bunnett look disconcerted.

Chapter II

July 17, 8 a.m.–5.15 p.m.

As he brews, so shall he drink.
BEN JOHNSON

Nigel awoke to the remorseless chattering of a multitude of sparrows, and the long-drawn notes of the priory clock booming eight. He went to the window and looked out. The roofs of the town stretched downwards away from him, grey-tiled, mossy, sharply-pitched; there was a curious attractiveness in their irrelevant angles, that seemed like a choppy grey-green sea frozen into immobility: their architects, no doubt, had never heard of town planning, but the relationship of house to house was fixed by a sure instinct. Brilliant sunshine blessed the town, while the wooded hills beyond were veiled in mist that promised a scorching noonday. Nigel wondered idly where the brewery was. That brick chimney over there might be it. It was difficult in this fresh sunlight to take seriously either Mr. Bunnett or the fantastic problem that he had proposed. Last night Nigel had gone to bed convinced that the brewer was one of the nastiest characters and quite the most dangerous that he had ever met. Now, he attributed this rather hysterical judgment to the unsettling influence of the Maiden Astbury Literary Society. He was thinking up some well-chosen phrases in which to describe this body to Georgia as he came down to breakfast.

"I hope you are quite recovered," said Mrs. Cammison.

"Recovered? Oh, yes, thank you. The ordeal was not so bad as I expected. But, look here, is it all right—my staying on a few days more? I could easily——"

"Stay as long as you like," said Herbert Cammison.

"But are you seriously going to take on this ridiculous business about Truffles?"

"Well, I seem to have let myself in for it. I must have been drunk last night. Still, I've always wanted to see over a brewery. 'Simple pleasures,' as Oscar Wilde said, 'are the last refuge of the complex'—and what simpler pleasures could there be than seeing your Mr. Bunnett's face when I told him my fee?"

"Yes, he doesn't like paying out money. Half the equipment in the brewery is obsolete, but Mr. Bunnett is too old-fashioned and too much of a skinflint to have it replaced. But look here, young Nigel, what do you propose to do if you do find out that someone was responsible for bumping off Truffles?"

"Well, tell Bunnett, I suppose—I mean, it is rather a bad show chucking a harmless beast into an open copper just because you dislike its owner."

"Wait a minute. You may or may not realise it now, but Bunnett is a thoroughly vindictive man. No one so close with money would consent to pay the exorbitant fee you demanded—just in order to prove a wild suspicion—if he was quite sane. I am telling you, in all seriousness, that Bunnett is not altogether sane. Like other unloved persons who happen to possess almost unlimited power, he has a marked persecution mania. His belief that someone 'murdered' his dog is a symptom of that mania. At the same time, he knows he is making a fool of himself—so his motive for finding a victim is even stronger."

"Yes, I see all that: so what?"

"Do you know what Bunnett will do to anyone you may succeed in pinning the guilt upon?"

"Sack him, I suppose."

"That will merely be the preliminary," said the doctor grimly. "He will do his level best to hound the chap out of existence. He will make it impossible for him to get another job, in the first place. And if you think he will let the chap live comfortably on the dole, you're very much mistaken."

"Damn it," Nigel protested, "I can't really swallow that. It's too melodramatic even for my sensation-loving mind."

For the first time he saw an expression of impatience on Cammison's face.

"You know as well as I do that people with a lust for power plus a persecution mania live in a world of melodrama. I could tell you things about Bunnett——"

"No horrors at breakfast, please," interrupted Sophie in that deceptively neutral voice of hers. It was enough to take the tenseness out of the atmosphere, though. Herbert's face was impassive again and he spoke more lightly.

"Well, promise me anyway that—if you do find out a culprit—you won't do anything about it till you've had a talk with me."

"O.K. That's fair enough. I could always hand back Eustace his cheque, if you convinced me that I ought to hold my tongue."

"I'd convince you all right, young Nigel."

Herbert seemed about to amplify this; but a glance from his wife, which Nigel intercepted, silenced him. Gazing noncommittally down his nose, as was his habit when reflecting on the behaviour of present company, Nigel sought to interpret that glance; there was entreaty in it—and something very like panic, too. Oh, well, let it go. But Nigel's memory was far too retentive to let anything go for good.

He began asking Herbert about his work in Maiden Astbury. Though a specialist in surgery, Cammison had preferred to take up a general practice. His contempt for the Harley Street type was blistering—"all spit, polish and pompousness," he called them; "all you need to get on there is a good tailor, a posh-looking butler, and nerve enough to make people pay a hundred guineas for advice that any G.P. could give them for two. Racketeers in tailcoats! The only thing to be said for them is that it is the rich they rob."

When Cammison spoke about his own work, which he did without hesitation, complacence or false modesty, his swarthy, impassive face lit up with an expression almost of fanaticism. His eyes seemed to be looking right through Nigel into some vision of the future as he inveighed against social conditions—the under-nutrition of children throughout the industrial areas where he had first worked, the cynical way in which some employers of labour attempted to evade health regulations—"and you needn't go to the industrial areas to find that sort of thing. Why, in this very town"—Cammison broke off abruptly: then said, "For the price of a few battleships, we could give you a healthy nation. We have the knowledge, the skill, the material resources; but those in power prefer to use them for destroying their competitors and safe-guarding their own profits."

After breakfast Dr. Cammison went off on his rounds and Nigel strolled about the town. Returning at midday, he found his hostess sitting in the little garden at the back of the house: Nigel fetched a deck-chair and sat down beside her.

"Your husband is a remarkable man. He must do a lot of good here."

"Yes, I think he does. He finds himself up against things, though."

Nigel waited for her to amplify this, but she said no more.

He studied her handsome, ingenuous face; the horn-rimmed spectacles that somehow made her look as though she were playing a part in an extempore charade; the large, capable hands knitting away at a child's jersey. A baffling creature—it seemed as if nothing could possibly ruffle that humorous maternal composure. Nigel leant back and said quietly:

"Why are you afraid of Mr. Bunnett?"

The large, capable hands paused for a moment, then resumed their knitting. Without turning her head, she replied:

"That would be a long story."

Nigel was reminded of what he had said at tea yesterday—"It is a long and rather discreditable story." He asked lightly:

"Not too discreditable, I hope?"

"Some people would think it so," Sophie Cammison replied with disarming frankness. She looked straight at him as she added, "You wouldn't."

Nigel felt at the same time rebuked and gratified.

"You must forgive me," he said. "I am incurably inquisitive about other people's affairs."

A little summer breeze fluttered the rambler-roses and swept the lawn with the shadows of overhanging leaves.

Nigel said, "Excuse this harping on old Bunnett, but I can't imagine him as the owner of a brewery. However does he manage to keep his employees, for one thing?"

"Oh, that's Joe."

"Joe?"

"His younger brother. He's the staff-manager. They'd all do anything for him. He really acts as a sort of buffer between the staff and Eustace. He's always trying to get Eustace to modernise the plant, and so on, but Eustace is terribly conservative."

"I should say that Eustace would turn down any suggestion merely because it came from someone else."

"Yes, I expect that's true."

Nigel was conscious again of that guarded note in her voice.

"I should like to meet Joe."

"He's just gone off on holiday. He keeps a cabin-cruiser down at Poolhampton. He was going round the Lizard, up the Welsh coast this time, I believe. It's the sort of thing I'd love to do."

"A motor-cruiser?"

"Oh, no. Joe despises them. He hasn't even got an auxiliary engine. He says no sailor worth his salt needs an engine. We've often told him it was rather dangerous—without one, I mean."

"Sounds as if he ought to have been a sailor."

"He would have liked to. But I believe his brother made him come into the brewery when he was quite young."

"So Eustace has Joe under his thumb, too?"

Mrs. Cammison considered this.

"Yes," she said, "I'm afraid he has, a bit. Joe is the hail-fellow-well-met sort—frightfully popular with everyone, and quite brave physically. But I expect he's a bit of a moral weakling. We're very fond of him."

A very revealing little statement, in more ways than one, thought Nigel. He found himself liking Sophie Cammison more and more.

At 4 p.m. Nigel was walking with his ostrich stride and preoccupied air through the main gates of the brewery. To his left was a great brick-face, oozing steam here and there, with a few windows set irregularly, high up, their panes not all intact. The familiar smell of malt permeated the air. Farther on there was a raised platform, and backed against it a lorry into which men were rolling barrels. Climbing on to this platform, beyond which was an office with ALL INQUIRIES HERE placarded on it, Nigel could see to his right a long tunnel: barrels were proceeding towards him along this tunnel, moving with the portly, dignified gait of a civic procession. Nigel repressed a strong impulse to take off his hat to them. Lost in admiration, he did not at first hear the shout from the foreman.

"Stand away, sir!"

Nigel looked up to where the man was pointing, and leapt convulsively aside. A huge crate was descending rapidly towards the spot where he had been standing, twirling round at the end of a chain. The foreman winked.

"Unhealthy spot, this, sir. Tackle broke the other day."

"And was anyone underneath?"

"Not half there wasn't. Old George got knocked out. Bust his shoulder, it did, and bleedin' lucky it wurn't his head."

"Well, I suppose you've got a new tackle now, after that."

"Not we. Patched up the old 'un, that's all. When Mr. Joe comes back, though——"

At that moment the foreman's attention was distracted, and, after a last glance at the barrels gliding on the conveyor, Nigel went into the office.

"Mr. Bunnett?" said the clerk. "I don't think he's on the premises now. I will just inquire."

"He said he would arrange for me to be shown round this afternoon. Perhaps Mr. Sorn will know about it."

The clerk took up a house-telephone and indulged in some spirited back-chat with a disembodied squeak at the other end of the wire.

"He's not in, sir. Mr. Sorn is coming round to attend to you."

The clerk showed no marked inclination to resume work, and regaled Nigel with hot tips, dead certs, and intimate news from the stable. Shortly Gabriel Sorn appeared, looking unexpectedly efficient in a white sort of umpire's coat. He led Nigel through a variety of passages and swing-doors, the last of these opening into the most hellish din Nigel had ever heard.

"The bottling-room," Sorn shouted in his ear.

Bottles on all sides. Marching sedately along conveyors, turning corners, jerking under the filling and corking apparatus, lying meekly down to have labels stamped on them, the bottles looked at least as human as the slatternly girls who, with sullen, mechanical movements, helped their progress and fed the machine. For a moment Nigel thought of these marching armies of bottles as glass gods, and the girls as devotees performing an endless and uncouth ritual for their worship. Then, half-deafened by the roaring machinery and the rattle-clash of glass, he allowed himself to be led away.

He followed his guide up a steep ladder into a sort of signal-box, ten feet above the floor of the building. There he was introduced to a tall, lean, despondent-looking man, with the biggest and blackest eyebrows that Nigel had ever seen.

"Mr. Barnes, our head brewer."

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Well, we might as well have some tea before I conduct you through the inferno," said Sorn.

He handed Nigel a cup of tea and a plate of dry biscuits. Mr. Barnes scratched his chin, poured out a glass of beer, scrutinised it with sombre curiosity, as though he had never seen the stuff before, and sipped at it delicately.

"M'm. Turned out nice, this brew," he said dreamily: then suddenly tipped the rest down his throat.

"How you can drink that stuff at four o'clock in the afternoon beats me," said Sorn.

"Never could fancy tea. Poison, that's what it is. Turns your insides to leather. A tannin process, as you might say."

"Joke," said Sorn.

Nigel looked out of the plate-glass window of the signal-box. Two men were sitting on a barrel down below, chatting in a desultory way. Nigel remembered the chattiness of the foreman and the clerk.

"Is this a slack time or something?" he said. "Some of your chaps don't seem to be bursting themselves with effort."

Mr. Barnes laid a finger to the side of his nose.

"When the cat's away——"

"Old Bunface hasn't turned up to-day," amplified Sorn. "You'd see them jumping to it all right if he was snooping about."

Nigel noticed that Sorn was quite a different person inside the brewery. Last night he had been prickly, argumentative, very much on his poetic dignity, self-conscious: here he seemed more at home, more sure of himself, easier to get on with, but possibly less interesting. Clearly he kept the surrealist poet and the brewer's pupil in two separate compartments, and the latter was much more interested in his work than the former would have cared to admit.

"I expected that Bunnett would be here to give me the dope on the Truffles case," said Nigel.

"Oh, he'll probably turn up soon," said Sorn unconcernedly.

"Hasn't been around at all to-day, has he?" said Mr. Barnes.

"No. What of it? Do you *like* him hanging about? Count your blessings, Mr. Head Brewer."

Gabriel's voice sounded unnecessarily irritable.

"That's right," said Mr. Barnes uncomfortably—torn, no doubt, between loyalty to his employer and his own feelings of relief.

"Hanging about is one of old Bunface's most repulsive characteristics," Sorn went on. "He has to be standing over his workmen all the time. He'd wear carpet slippers, only there's such a racket in here he doesn't need them."

"Steady on, Mr. Sorn! You shouldn't say that," remonstrated the head brewer, his black eyebrows rising half-way up to his forehead and giving him a fleeting resemblance to George Robey. Sorn's lower lip jutted out pugnaciously. Nigel was worried again by the young man's likeness to—who could it be, now?

"Well, what about Ed Parsons?" Sorn demanded truculently.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Barnes, "he was feeling poorly that day, see. That's what it was—he was ailing."

"Bunk!" Sorn turned to Nigel. "Ed Parsons is the chap in charge of the lorry-loading. Well, one day he was out there and Bunnett came along and stood behind him. Ed knew he was there, but he wasn't going to look round. Bunnett just stood there, staring at Ed with those beady little reptile eyes of his, saying nothing. Ed couldn't stand it after a bit—he was sick on the spot, vomited, threw up—that's Mr. Eustace Bunnett for you." Sorn's voice had become almost shrill.

"There ain't no sense raking up past history, Mr. Sorn," said the head brewer: "let sleeping dogs lie, that's what I say. Anyways, we'll maybe not be having the governor here much longer."

"What's that? What the devil do you mean?" exclaimed Sorn sharply.

"Rumours has come to my ears," replied Mr. Barnes darkly. "I will not specify my informant, but rumours has come to my ears that there may be an amalgamation. A big Midland firm, whose name I will not mention, is desirous of buying out Mr. Bunnett."

"You don't say?" Gabriel Sorn's voice was insouciant, but Nigel noticed a sort of twinge pass over his face; the young man swallowed hard, before he said:

"Well, Strangeways, if you're ready, we'll have a look round."

Nigel was supplied with one of the long white coats, since a tour of the brewery was apt to leave its mark on one's clothes.

They left Mr. Barnes meditatively pouring out another glass of beer, and climbed down from his eyrie. Along a passage, up another ladder, and they were standing on a platform beside two vessels. One was like an enormous washtub, the other was a copper sphere resembling nothing so much as the body of a stratosphere balloon. Sorn pointed to the latter.

"The pressure-copper," he said; "the malt extract and the hops are boiled up together in it. We're extra busy just now. Three separate boilings to-day—the process takes almost two and a half hours. This copper's only been put in lately—the pride of the brewery. Joe had the hell of a fight with Eustace to get it installed."

He turned to the enormous washtub. "This is the old open copper. Much more wastage here—evaporation. This is the one Truffles got slung into."

So Nigel was now on the scene of the crime. He could only just see into the open copper by standing on his toes. It certainly didn't look as if an elderly dog of sedentary habits could have jumped in.

"They'll be drawing off soon. At five o'clock they clean the pressure copper."

Nigel wondered how anyone could get into that copper orb; then he noticed a manhole high up in the side of it.

Gabriel Sorn led him right through the different processes, talking technicalities which Nigel made little attempt to take in. Not being of a mechanical mind, he was less impressed by scientific marvels than by odd, irrelevant details, such as the great, woolly dollops of foam scattered over the floor in one place, the pungent smells he encountered—steam, hops, yeast, malt, and heaven knew what besides, the eerie atmosphere of the whitewashed vaults below the brewery, with hundreds of barrels lying side by side on the sandy floor, one or two occasionally fizzing quietly to each other. In an alcove here there was a rusty iron gate.

"That's the well, through that gate. It was sunk soon after they built the brewery. The town water supply didn't make good beer. The chemical quality of the water makes an enormous difference."

Sorn dropped a stone in. One—two—three—plop. Nigel counted. A good place to get rid of a person, he thought. The same thing, though, occurred to him several times during their tour. In fact the whole brewery seemed a series of temptations to anyone murderously inclined. There were the vats for rejected beer, left unattended for months: a beautiful way of disposing of the body. Or the fermenting vessels. Sorn clambered over the rail of a staircase on to a huge circular wooden platform, and beckoned Nigel to follow him.

"This is one of the fermenting vessels under our feet. If you slide back the lid and peer into it, you will pass out in thirty seconds. It's full of C.O.^{2}."

Nigel intimated that he would take Sorn's word for it.

Pipes, pipes, pipes. The whole brewery seemed as full of complicated intestinal tubes as the human body; writhing sinuously round corners, disappearing into the ceiling, tripping you up—and all, no doubt, gurgling with lovely beer.

"Decent," thought Nigel.

The heat in some of the processes was terrific. After visiting the boiler-room Nigel began to wish that he had some of the lovely beer gurgling inside himself. He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Want to cool off?" said Sorn. "Follow me."

They went up and down some more of the ubiquitous ladders, through a room stocked with enormous one and a half hundredweight sacks, till they reached a very solid-looking door. Before opening it, Sorn pressed a switch at the side.

"The emergency bell," he explained. "A chap locked himself in here one evening by mistake. He just managed to keep alive by running up and down. After that, Bunnett *had* to get a safety-device installed."

When the solid door swung aside, Nigel soon understood why. They were in the cold-storage room. The cold did not strike you in the face as you entered, for there was no draught; but after a few moments, you began to feel it insidiously creeping into your bones. Glittering with frost, the cold-storage tanks stood white and monstrous. Sorn had shut the door behind them, and the silence, after the confused roaring of machinery with which Nigel was still dazed, was like the frozen silence of the Ice Cap. Nigel found himself talking in a whisper. Sorn was explaining the method of regulating the temperature, and Nigel—who felt he could not really compete with any more scientific data—was running his finger idly up and down a frosted groove in the tank nearest the door, when it encountered a small, solid object at the base of this groove. There was a little pocket of deep frost there, Nigel's eye registered, and the object lay on top of it—its surface was a little frosted, but it was not burried. Almost unconsciously he took up this object, and presently dropped it into his pocket, where it was destined to lie forgotten for several days—and thus to add materially to the difficulties of the grotesque problem that even now awaited Nigel outside the cold-storage-room door.

While he had been showing Nigel round, Sorn's manner had been efficient and impersonal; obviously he was accustomed to functioning as a guide—the descriptive phrases came fluently, absent-mindedly almost, off his tongue, like runs from the bat of a Wally Hammond when he has passed his fifty. But Nigel got the impression that, behind this mechanical flow of details, Sorn's mind was engaged upon some quite different matter. Once or twice he seemed to surprise in the young man's eyes a look of—fear, was it? Anguish? Or some more complex battle of emotions? Nigel wondered suddenly whether it was not Sorn who had killed Bunnett's dog. He said:

"Well, I suppose I ought to be doing something to earn my fee."

"What? Oh, Truffles. Yes," said Sorn absently.

"On the other hand, I can't do much till Mr. Bunnett tells me some more of the facts."

"No. I can show you the—er—the scene of the disappearance, if you like," said Sorn, opening the solid door and standing aside to let Nigel pass. "We'll go up to Eustace's room. He may have turned up by now."

But they did not, as it happened, go up to Eustace's room. While Sorn was locking the door behind them, they heard a muffled shouting somewhere away to the right. It made Nigel realise that the roar of machinery had dwindled to a mild hum. He looked automatically at his watch: three minutes past five; work must be nearly over for the day. A wild-eyed man rushed up to Gabriel Sorn, said something breathlessly, of which Nigel could only hear the last two words—"pressure-copper," and hurried away again with Sorn at his heels. Nigel followed. A few seconds later he was climbing again on to the platform where the coppers stood. Mr. Barnes was already there, blasphemously addressing a small knot of men below who had been trying to get up on to the platform. Beside him stood another man, whose dirty blue dungarees accentuated the pallor of his face. The manhole of the pressure copper was open. Mr. Barnes jerked his finger at it. Sorn clambered up and looked in. Nigel could see him stiffen, recoil, and sway as if he was about to faint. They helped him down, and Nigel took his place.

The inside of the copper was dark, but not so dark that Nigel could not see the livid thing that smirked up at him. It was a half-disjointed skeleton: but not, this time, the skeleton of a dog. What was left of the skeleton was wearing the soaked and tattered remnants of a dinner-jacket and boiled shirt.

Nigel dragged his eyes away from the unpleasing spectacle, and jumped back on to the platform. Mr. Barnes and the cleaner were staring at him with the helpless, rather pathetic look of people faced by an emergency outside their normal experience.

"Have you phoned for the police and a doctor?" asked Nigel, realising as soon as he had said it that no one could stand in less need of a doctor than that man of bone inside the copper.

"Yes, sir," said the head brewer, "I just told Percy to——"

"Look here, we must get him out, we can't——" Sorn was very near to hysterics. Nigel took him by the shoulders and shook him hard.

"Pull yourself together," he ordered.

Sorn passed a hand wearily over his forehead; then stared strangely at Nigel, his body going rigid again. He whispered, with the over-deliberate, unnatural seriousness of a drunken man:

"Do you know who that is in there?"

"No," said Nigel, "but we may be able to find out."

He stood irresolutely for a moment. Then, muttering to himself, "No point waiting for the police," told the cleaner to get an electric torch and search inside the copper for any articles that might be lying about. "Don't disturb the—er—body, but if there's anything in the pockets you can fetch it out. And put on these gloves before you go in, we don't want to multiply the fingerprints on the outside of the copper."

"Fingerprints," said Mr. Barnes dubiously, scratching his chin. "You mean this here is murder, like?"

"No one got through that manhole by accident, and you don't suppose anyone would commit suicide in such a fantastic way, do you?" replied Nigel a little irritably.

"That's right," said Mr. Barnes.

"Shall I send a man to look in the hop-back?" he added.

"The hop-back?" asked Nigel mystified.

"That's right. Where the wort drains into. Any small articles would slip through the outlet pipe when the wort was drained off, see?"

"Right. No, on second thoughts, you'd better not." Nigel realised that any clues which might be found had better be found under his own eye.

A hollow, booming sound proceeded from the copper as the cleaner moved about inside. The watchers heard a stifled gasp. The lethargic Mr. Barnes sprang with unexpected alacrity to the manhole. The cleaner passed up an object to him.

"Look here, Mr. Barnes, this is the governor's watch—fastened in his waistcoat, it was." He spoke in an urgent whisper, but somehow it reached the ears of the men below, and was taken up in hoarse mutterings—

"The guv'nor."

"The guv'nor!"

"It's the guv'nor in there."

"They've found 'is watch."

"Someone chucked the guv'nor into the pressure copper!"

"Oo d'yer say chucked 'im in?"

Nigel studied the faces of his companions. The head brewer seemed bemused, his brain trying to catch up with things. Gabriel Sorn looked as if he was working out a calculation on which his life depended.

The cleaner scrambled through the manhole, blinked a little, then drew from his deep overall pockets a fountain-pen, a pair of pince-nez with most of the glass missing, some loose change, and an electric torch. Nigel made him lay them on the floor in a row.

Mr. Barnes reached down his hand towards the pince-nez; then drew it slowly back, as though the pince-nez were a dog of uncertain temper.

"Those are Mr. Bunnett's spectacles, I'd swear to it," he said. "And that's his fountain-pen, too—a Waterman. That proves it."

"I'm afraid it isn't so simply proved as all that," said Nigel. He realised that his companions were badly shocked. Particularly for a nervous type like Sorn, repression would be dangerous. Nigel started talking in a dispassionate lecturer's voice:

"To establish identity, it is necessary——"

But his fidgeting audience did not have to listen long. A tramp of feet was heard. A large, pale-faced police inspector advanced with unhurried stride; beside him was a sergeant; and close behind, to Nigel's surprise, Dr. Cammison. The inspector climbed cumbrously up the ladder, fixing the little group with suspicious, irritable eyes. Nigel suddenly knew that the inspector was going to say, "Now then, what's all this about?" Sure enough, the inspector did. No one else seemed prepared to answer this fairly simple question, so Nigel did.

"A body in the copper."

The inspector glared balefully at Nigel; then, baffled by his serious expression, said:

"A body, eh? Well, we'll come to that." He produced a notebook and asked in louder, bullying tones:

"Who found it?"

The cleaner gulped and replied, "Me, sir."

"Name?"

His name and address were taken, then Sorn's and the head brewer's. The inspector turned, with a look of crafty suspicion, to Nigel.

"And your name, sir?"

"Nigel Strangeways."

"One of the employees here?"

"No, I——"

"Ah, I thought not. And may I ask what is your business here?"

Nettled by the man's pompous, aggressive voice, Nigel replied solemnly:

"Well, I came to see a man about a dog."

As the inspector's jaw dropped and an angry flush appeared in his face, Nigel could not resist adding:

"But it seems that, in the words of the poet, the man it was who died."

Chapter III

July 17, 5.15–7.50 p.m.

When shall this slough of sense be cast,
This dust of thoughts be laid at last,
The man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?

A. E. HOUSMAN

"You came to see a man about a dog?" said the inspector when he had recovered his powers of speech. "Do you expect me to take that seriously, or are you being humorous at my expense?"

The pedantry of the phrase made the inspector seem really dangerous for a moment. Nigel was annoyed with himself for falling to the temptation of pulling his leg.

"No, quite serious. I oughtn't perhaps, to have put it like that." Nigel proceeded briefly to explain the commission that Mr. Bunnett had given him.

"Mr. Strangeways is a private inquiry agent. He has assisted the police on several occasions. His uncle is an Assistant Commissioner," explained Dr. Cammison, who had been watching the proceedings with the very faintest occasional twitch of a muscle in his impassive face.

"Very well," said the inspector coldly. "We'd better get to work. My name is Tyler, by the way, and this is Sergeant Tollworthy. Who is the deceased?"

"The body is unidentifiable—at least as far as I can tell," Nigel said. "But certain articles have been found in the copper that Mr. Barnes has identified as belonging to Mr. Eustace Bunnett. There they are."

When the name of Bunnett was mentioned, Sergeant Tollworthy was heard to ejaculate a wish that the Deity should strike him pink, and even the inspector seemed a little shaken. He soon recovered himself, though.

"These articles shouldn't have been touched," he said, looking censoriously at Nigel. "Who removed them?"

"The cleaner," said Nigel quickly. "I take full responsibility for that."

The inspector turned brusquely to the cleaner, and addressed him in the loud, hectoring voice that he apparently reserved for members of the working-class.

"You did, eh? Describe their positions."

The cleaner licked his lips nervously and said:

"Well, sir, they was like this. The watch chain was fastened through 'is waistcoat button-hole; the watch was dangling at the end of it. The money was in his trouser pocket and the electric torch in his coat pocket. Fountain-pen clipped on inside pocket. The spectacles had got caught by that thing that goes round your ear—caught in the side of his head, sir, see?"

"And that's all you found?"

"Yes, sir."

"Quite sure?"

" 'Ere, what's the——?"

"Frisk him, Sergeant."

Inspector Tyler was taking no chances. The cleaner had to submit to a thorough examination of his pockets and person.

"Here, you," said the inspector when it was over, "give me that torch. I'll take a look inside now."

The little group of men on the platform stood still and silent as he climbed awkwardly through the manhole. It somehow impressed them that he should climb straight in without even a preliminary glance at the appalling object that sprawled there. They heard his feet shuffling inside. Then silence. He seemed to be in there an interminable time. Sorn was fidgeting with his fingers. At last the inspector's face reappeared at the manhole; he was paler even than usual, and beads of sweat stood out below the peak of his cap. With ponderous, deliberate movements he climbed out; then stood for a moment, brushing at his uniform. At last he turned to the head brewer.

"Hmm. That venthole, outlet pipe, whatever you call it—where does it lead to?"

"Into the hop-back," said Mr. Barnes. "If it's clues you want——"

"Tollworthy, get someone to show you this hop-back and make a thorough search of it. Now then, who's in authority here?"

"I suppose, in a manner of speaking, I am," said Mr. Barnes, "seeing as how the governor's been done in and Mr. Joe's away holidaying."

"Very well, I shall want a private room for the examination of witnesses presently. Will you see about that? I dare say Mr. Bunnett's would do."

"Oh, the governor would never allow that," exclaimed Mr. Barnes, in shocked tones. The influence of Eustace Bunnett died hard. The inspector disregarded his protest.

"If you want to make a preliminary examination, doctor, you'd better do it now. I don't imagine it'll be of much use, though. There's not much left to examine," he added grimly. "Don't move it, please, sir. Our photographer'll be here in a minute."

Dr. Cammison hesitated for a moment, as though to say something, then disappeared into the copper.

"Now," said Inspector Tyler, "when was Mr. Bunnett last seen?"

"He's not been here to-day," said the head brewer.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive certain. The clerk at the inquiry office will tell you he's not been in. We'd've known if he had been about all right, don't you worry."

"Mr. Bunnett was never what you'd call an Unseen Presence," added Gabriel Sorn.

The inspector turned a suspicious glare upon him for a moment. Sorn did not stand up to it too well.

"What time do the employees arrive here in the morning?"

"Five a.m.—the first of them."

"I'll need to see those men. Are they on the premises?"

"No. They'll have hopped it by now."

"Well, send for them, please."

The head brewer descended the ladder, and was heard to tell one of the men below that the Lord God Almighty wanted to see so and so, so and so, and so and so in the brewery, double-quick. To cover up this revelation, which did not seem altogether gratifying to the inspector, Nigel said:

"Mr. Bunnett was at a party at the Cammisons' last night. He left with his wife, between 11.0 and 11.15. That fixes one end of it. He told me then that he was not going to be at the brewery in the morning, but would meet me here at tea-time."

The inspector's small, light-blue eyes gazed speculatively at Nigel.

"Were you not surprised when Mr. Bunnett did not keep his appointment?"

"Only moderately. I thought he would be turning up any moment. Mr. Sorn was kind enough to show me round."

"And Mr. Bunnett left no message for you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Hmm. Very queer." The inspector seemed to radiate an atmosphere of suspicion that permeated, like a damp fog, everything he said and the bones of those who listened to him. Nigel put him down as an ambitious man whose ambitions had not been achieved quickly enough and were going sour on him.

"The first job," the inspector was saying, "is to establish identity and fix the time of death as near as we can."

"And that's not going to be a pushover," said Herbert Cammison dryly, emerging from the copper. "The flesh has all been digested, so we shall have no help in the way of birthmarks. The lower jaw and a number of small bones have become detached—we shall find them all, no doubt, but it will take some time to articulate the skeleton; luckily the clothes have held it together a bit. If there is any congenital deformity of the bones, or a mended fracture—say, I shall find it when I make my thorough examination, and it might give you a pointer. All I can tell you at the moment is that the remains appear to be of similar height and physique as Bunnett, the clothes are his, and the hair resembles his in colour. As you noticed, the body had got caught over the steamcoil inside the copper. The heat of that pipe alone would have been enough to burn away all the flesh that was touching it. Incidentally, it was the body's being caught up on this coil that prevented it sinking to the bottom of the copper when the stuff was drawn out and so blocking the mouth of the outlet pipe. Where are the teeth, by the way?"

"The teeth? Ah, I noticed that," said the inspector slowly.

"Bunnett, I know, had a complete set of artificial teeth—full upper and lower sets. The upper jaw and the detached lower jaw of the skull in there are both toothless. You've got to find those teeth. They would be the best means of identificaton."

"I shall attend to that, sir," said the inspector, a little testily. "Now what about the time of death?"

"Can't help you. Nor will the post-mortem. The organs are simply not there for us to examine. All I can say is that the body must have been in that copper six hours at the very least to have been reduced to this state."

The inspector turned to Mr. Barnes.

"Do they open that manhole before they let the stuff in—the hops and so on—in the morning?"

"No."

"And what time does the boiling process commence?"

"Eight a.m."

"Which means that—as far as we can tell at present—if the body is Mr. Bunnett's, it was put in there some time between 11.15 last night and eight o'clock this morning."

Conscious of an attentive audience, the inspector was talking himself into a better temper.

"Mr. Barnes, I shall want the name and address of your night-watchman. . . . Thank you. Now, Dr. Cammison, there's nothing more for you to do here at present. I wonder if you would mind ringing up the wid—Mrs. Bunnett. You are the family medical man, so it will come more natural like from you. Don't alarm the good lady. Just ask her when her husband left the house this morning—you can make some excuse for the inquiry—Mr. Strangeways was wondering why he had not kept the appointment—something like that."

"Very well," said Cammison.

"Just a moment, doctor," said Tyler, "before you do. Does there seem to you any likelihood at all that this is a case of suicide or accident? It hardly seems worth asking, but——"

"Accident, out of the question," replied Cammison curtly. "Suicide? It would mean that the unfortunate fellow got inside, bolted the manhole—which can't be done from inside—or if it had been left open someone would have noticed it this morning before the stuff was poured in—and then lain down and waited to be boiled alive. The same applies to his having jumped in some time to-day, after the boiling process had started: the manhole would have been found open and it would have been reported."

"No one reported to that effect, Mr. Barnes?" asked the inspector.

"No. I'll make inquiries to-morrow, if you like, and find out for certain."

"If you please."

"No, you can take it from me, suicide is just possible theoretically, but humanly quite impossible," said Cammison.

"That's as I thought," said Tyler. "And the same goes for the body, eh? Theoretically, I mean, it might be somebody else, but practically it's pretty certainly Mr. Bunnett's?"

"I wouldn't go so far as that," replied Cammison, relapsing into professional caution. "There's one more thing, by the way. The murderer could not have got the victim through that manhole without first rendering him unconscious. If it was a drug, poison, or anaesthetic, I shan't be able to help you. If it was anything that would affect the bone-structure—a blow on the head, say—my examination might be able to give you a lead."

Herbert Cammison went off to telephone. Shortly after, the photographer and fingerprint man arrived and set to work. Nigel stared at them absent-mindedly, trying to recall something that was at the back of his mind. The copper. Boiling. Ah, yes!——

"Sorn, didn't you say that there were three separate boilings in this copper to-day?"

"Yes."

"Of two and a half hours each?"

"More or less. Yes."

"Look here, Inspector. Cammison said the body couldn't have got into that state unless it had been undergoing the boiling process for six hours at least. That implies it must have been there during all three boiling periods. Therefore it must have been put in before the first one—before eight o'clock this morning—whether it is Bunnett or somebody else."

"Yes, sir. That seems correct enough. I didn't know there were three separate boilings. I thought the copper was working continuously all day."

There were other implications of this point, Nigel felt, but his brain was too tired to unravel them. At this moment Sergeant Tollworthy appeared, flushed, dirty and triumphant. His honest yeoman's head was set squarely on a brick-red neck. He was carrying something carefully in his handkerchief. He opened the handkerchief to reveal the grisliest object—except for the corpse itself—that had turned up so far in this case. Two dental plates, warped, battered and distorted, with a few of the teeth still in position. In the handkerchief lay also a number of loose teeth, a signet ring and some small bones.

"Recognise this ring?" Tyler jerked his head curtly towards Mr. Barnes.

"That's the governor's all right. His crest, see?"

"Must have slipped off the finger-bone when the flesh was eaten away. Sergeant, let the ambulance men get the body out now. I'll be back at the station in half an hour. . . . Ah, there you are, doctor. What does she say?"

Nigel was conscious of a tensening in the atmosphere. Mr. Barnes' black eyebrows were drawn together. Gabriel Sorn was staring fixedly at the back of his right hand; even the inspector seemed to have shed some of his official skin, and was looking excitedly inquisitive. Herbert Cammison's face was impassive as ever, though; in the same tones that he might have remarked, "See that the patient is kept warm, he has a slight touch of fever, nothing to be alarmed about," he said:

"Mrs. Bunnett tells me she has not seen her husband to-day. He did not appear at breakfast."

"Not at breakfast?" exclaimed the inspector. "D'you mean to say the deceased was missing from his home all day and his wife has taken no steps about it?" He glared ferociously at Cammison, as though the doctor were responsible for Mrs. Bunnett's unnatural behaviour.

"It would seem so," Herbert replied imperturbably. "But you'd better ask her yourself. If you like, we'll step over there now. I'll break the news of this discovery to her, and then—if she is in a fit state to be questioned—you can interrogate her."

The inspector gave a few more instructions, then prepared to depart.

"I must ask you to remain on the spot, Mr. Barnes," he said. "When I have interviewed Mrs. Bunnett, I shall be returning to look over her husband's private office and interview those men. Will you please hold yourself in readiness."

Mr. Barnes looked more despondent than ever.

"That's all right. I shall have to be getting in touch with the excise authorities. A whole day's brewing wasted—it's enough to break your heart."

Which, thought Nigel as the head brewer walked away, considering the character of Eustace Bunnett, was perhaps the most sensible view of the day's occurrences that could be taken. Nigel himself was torn between disgust and curiosity. Eustace Bunnett was better dead—there could be no doubt about that, and Nigel had no desire to hound down the person who had eliminated him. Yet he felt himself somehow involved. It was not only the business of Truffles. He could not forget the strange reticences of Sophie Cammison, and that even stranger moment when she had laid her hand on his arm and asked him not to "sauce Mr. Bunnett any more"; it had been as though the spirit of Fear itself had laid a finger upon him. What was this fear that Sophie had communicated? But no, he thought, impatiently shaking back the lock of tow-coloured hair that drooped over his forehead; it's all moonshine, hoohaa. I'll have nothing to do with it.

"Well, I'll be getting along," he said.

"Won't you come over with us?" asked Cammison unexpectedly. The inspector frowned. "Very irregular, sir; I don't know that I could——"

"But look here," Cammison interrupted. "Strangeways is in on this already. The business of Truffles may be connected with Bunnett's death—or whoever's death it is that you're investigating."

"Oh, come, sir. That's straining things a bit. There's no call for mystificating this job any further," replied the inspector with irritating superiority.

Cammison said patiently:

"It *may* be coincidence, of course. But it's at least odd that, within a fortnight, first a dog and then its master should be killed in the same way. Isn't it possible that Truffles' death was a *dress-rehearsal for Bunnett's?*"

Even the inspector had to be impressed by this unnerving suggestion—all the more unnerving for being put forward in Cammison's calm, business-like tones.

"Well, sir, there may be something in that," he said. "But I like to do things regular, and——"

"Great Scott, man, this is a murder, not a case of traffic-obstruction. If you want to regularise the position, ring up Sir John Strangeways at the Yard to-night, and he'll give you Nigel's bona-fides."

So in the end Nigel found himself walking out of the brewery with the other two. He noticed that he was the only one not to be consulted; both Tyler and Cammison apparently took it for granted that he was an eager—if amateur—bloodhound straining on the leash. Oh, well, let it go. The Bunnetts' house was only a minute's walk from the brewery, a pretentious red-brick affair on the outskirts of the town, asserting itself crudely against Maiden Astbury's mellow, time-honoured dignity; a fitting habitation for its late owner, thought Nigel.

Dr. Cammison left them in the morning-room, while he went to speak with Mrs. Bunnett. The inspector sat solid and upright, his hands on his knees, looking straight in front of him. Nigel prowled restlessly about, fingering the furniture absent-mindedly. There was a studio portrait on the mantelpiece that attracted his attention; the head and shoulders of a middle-aged man; a roundish face, heavily brilliantined hair parted in the middle, a military moustache that only half-concealed the weakness of the small, too amiable mouth. The eyes held an expression half-apologetic, half-hearty. Nigel felt that this was the sort of man who would retain in civil life a temporary military title—yes, he would enjoy being called "Captain so and so"; he would probably address you as, "Well, chaps, how's things!" order drinks all round, and tell you a not very subtle dirty story. He would, without realising it, fear unpopularity more than anything else, but he would be popular—particularly with his "social inferiors." As to profession—he might be an unsuccessful chicken-farmer or a successful commercial traveller. He would, Nigel fancied, be exceptionally plausible when making excuses.

"Know who this is?" he asked the inspector.

"That's Mr. Joe Bunnett—Mr. Bunnett's brother."

"Good Lord! He's not a bit like Eustace. At least, the whole expression is different. There *is* a resemblance in feature, when you come to look at it."

What struck Nigel as more odd, however, was Sophie's having said that they were very fond of Joe; he really didn't look a bit their sort. Nigel was still pondering this when Dr. Cammison appeared at the door.

"Mrs. Bunnett is ready to talk to you now. I've told her that we are very much afraid her husband has met with his death. It would be desirable to keep off the unpleasant details."

"How is she taking it?" asked the inspector.

"Well, it is naturally a severe shock to her," replied Dr. Cammison. Nigel sensed some reservations behind this noncommittal statement. Even the inspector eyed Cammison curiously, as though expecting him to amplify it. The doctor, however, silently led the way to Mrs. Bunnett's drawing-room. While the inspector was expressing his condolences, Nigel studied Emily Bunnett. Her dazed eyes, feverishly flushed cheeks and trembling hands; the untidy mass of grey hair, a loop of it falling over her ear; the dowdy disarray of her dress, and the quivering at the corners of her long, weak, down-curving mouth—it all reminded Nigel of, what could it be? Something very different from the sorrowing widow. Yes, she was exactly like one of those repressed, lonely, queer old spinsters who suddenly, for no apparent reason, after a blameless lifetime, break out one day and get drunk and screech out blasphemies in the middle of the street and sorely embarrass the policemen who have to remove them. Nigel had seen just such a one, years ago, being dragged off through an applauding crowd in Pimlico.

Inspector Tyler was saying:

"Now, ma'am, you say you have not seen your husband since you both returned here about 11.20 last night. You went straight to bed. Your husband, who occupies a separate room, said he had a little work to do. You went to sleep at once and did not hear him go up to bed. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

That "sir," and a touch of commonness in Mrs. Bunnett's accent—quite different from the timid but ladylike tones of last night—startled Nigel. Eustace Bunnett must have married "beneath him"; his death had freed Emily from all his careful "training": now, at last, she could be herself again; this was the real Emily Bunnett.

The inspector, too, had been a little disconcerted by that word "sir." Its effect on him, though, was that unconsciously he reassumed something of the loud aggressive voice in which he had spoken to the cleaner at the brewery.

"You're telling me that, although your husband did not come down to breakfast, although later you found his bed had not been slept in, you took no action whatsoever about it? You did not even ring up the brewery to make inquiries?"

As though the bullying note in his voice reminded her of Eustace, reminded her that she was supposed to be "a lady," Emily Bunnett answered in her old, genteel tones:

"Yes, no, I mean. You see, my husband very much resented interference of any sort. He wouldn't like—wouldn't have liked the idea of my fussing about him. If he'd found out that I'd been making inquiries at the brewery, I mean, he'd have been very angry."

"But surely, when his bed had not been slept in—after all, didn't that strike you as—unusual, shall we say?"

Mrs. Bunnett's fingers twisted about her handkerchief. Her cheeks flushed a deeper red. At last she raised her head and said in a tiny, defiant voice:

"Well, it wasn't unusual. So there. It had happened several times before."

"What the devil——"

Dr. Cammison interrupted the inspector's outburst, saying quietly:

"You mean, your husband used to—go to other women?"

"Yes." Mrs. Bunnett's voice was almost inaudible. "And if he couldn't get them here, he used to go off and stay with women in Paris on his holidays. He never troubled to conceal it from me. He despised me too much to take the trouble——" Her voice broke, and at last she was weeping.

They did not stay much longer. Joe Bunnett's return from his holiday was imperatively necessary, but Emily knew no more of his movements than that he had sailed from Poolhampton and would be cruising around Land's End and up the Welsh Coast. Tyler would have to notify the various possible ports of call, and leave it at that. The Bunnett's servant deposed that she had heard the master and mistress come in about 11.20 last night, and then had gone to sleep. The inspector inquired the name of Bunnett's dentist, so that the sets of false teeth might be identified. After one or two more questions, they went out. The time for the post-mortem was arranged, and Tyler took a curt leave of the other two.

"Mrs. Bunnett didn't look too broken-hearted. And I don't wonder," said Nigel as they walked up the steep, narrow street. "A deliverance from bondage—that's what it must be for her. When Israel came out of Egypt!"

Herbert Cammison looked at him sharply.

"The first thing she said, when I told her that we feared her husband was dead, was 'Dead? Eustace dead? You're telling me the truth? Is he really dead at last? I can't believe it.' It was the shock, of course; she was not responsible for what she was saying," he added meaningly.

"Of course not," said Nigel without expression.

"It gave me a turn, I can tell you. She looked as if I'd brought her a present. Flushed; her hair tumbling down; pathetic. You noticed her accent, too, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Funny. I'd never suspected it. Well, that's that. And see here, young Nigel, none of this to Tyler. That man's too ambitious. All he's going to be concerned about is to make an arrest—and as quickly as possible. He'd clap Mrs. Bunnett into jail on the strength of what I've just told you. Tollworthy's a good sort. I've played a lot of cricket with him. But we'll have to watch our step with Tyler believe me. There's only one word for that man——"

Dr. Cammison stated the word.

"A meiosis, if anything," said Nigel.

Chapter IV

July 17, 8.55–10.30 p.m.

One Pinch, a hungry lean-faced villain,
A mere anatomy.
SHAKESPEARE, *Comedy of Errors*

"Do you really like drinking your coffee off the floor?" asked Sophie Cammison. "There is a little table beside you."

Nigel took up his cup from the floor and held it in his lap. He was sitting with his back against one of the arms of his deep arm-chair and his legs over the other. The carpet beside him was littered with cigarette-ash. Sophie glanced at it and sighed, half-vexed, half in resignation. Nigel really was an untidy creature. What was the use of leaving ash-trays about at every possible strategic point of the house, when he just ignored them? It was odd that she should still be able to get fussed about such a ridiculous little thing, after what Herbert had told her while she was dressing for dinner. Eustace Bunnett was dead, and here she was fussing over cigarette-ash. Dust unto dust; ashes unto ashes. She could scarcely believe it yet.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Nigel.

"I was thinking how silly it was of me to mind about your cigarette-ash when—well, when all this has just happened."

"Cigarette-ash? Oh, I say, I really am very sorry. What an awful mess I've made. I am quite bestially untidy."

Nigel's face looked comically concerned, like a small boy's who is about to burst into tears. He writhed out of the chair, nearly upsetting his coffee-cup in the process, took coal-shovel and brush out of the fireplace and began to sweep up the mess. Mrs. Cammison studied him over her knitting. He was entirely absorbed in what he was doing; his clumsy movements both touched and irritated her. How childish men were in their absorption over trifling things! It was impossible to imagine that this flushed awkward creature, who was so ineptly wielding brush and shovel, had ever followed a murderer through the distorted-mirror-world of his imagination, had written a book on the Caroline poets, had married one of the most remarkable women of her age.

"Why do you do it?" she asked suddenly.

"Do what?" said Nigel, twisting upright on his knees and glancing at her quizzically. "I should have thought this was the least reparation I could make for ruining your nice carpet."

"I don't mean that," said Sophie, a little annoyed by the implication that she was one of those rabidly house-proud women, "I mean, why do you mix yourself up in crime?"

"Sometimes one can't help getting mixed up," he said lightly.

Sophie Cammison's fingers paused a moment in their knitting. When they commenced again, it was unlike their usual mechanical movements, Nigel thought: it was as though she had flashed a message to them—Go on! Knit, I tell you. Knit! You mustn't break down just now! She said:

"But that's only sometimes. Why did you ever take it up?"

"Oh, something to do, I suppose. It seemed to be the only profession for which a classical education fitted one."

"Now you are laughing at me. I'm quite serious."

"So am I. It does. If ever, in your salad days—as one of my comic uncles calls them—you were compelled to do a Latin unseen, you'll know that it presents an accurate parallel with criminal detection. You have a long sentence, full of inversions; just a jumble of words it looks at first. That is what a crime looks like at first sight, too. The subject is a murdered man; the verb is the modus operandi, the way the crime was committed; the object is the motive. Those are the three essentials of every sentence and every crime. First you find the subject, then you look for the verb, and the two of them lead you to the object. But you have not discovered the criminal—the meaning of the whole sentence yet. There are a number of subordinate clauses, which may be clues or red-herrings, and you've got to separate them from each other in your own mind and reconstruct them to fit and to amplify the meaning of the whole. It's an exercise in analysis and synthesis—the very best training for detectives."

"But, really," exclaimed Sophie, rather overwhelmed by all this, "it sounds dreadfully dry and cold-blooded. You're leaving out the human element altogether."

"Oh, no, I'm not," said Nigel dogmatically. "Of course it's only an analogy, and no analogy holds true at every point. But to return to classical education. You learn to write Latin and Greek compositions in the style of certain authors. The first thing you learn is that all the best authors are constantly breaking the rules of the grammar-books; each has his own idiosyncracies; and that is equally true of the criminal—the murderer in particular. To write a good Latin or Greek composition requires more than a superficial gift of mimicry; it requires that you should get right inside the head and the skin of your model. You've got to try and think and feel like Thucydides or Livy or Cicero or Sophocles or Virgil. Similarly, a detective has to get right inside the character of a criminal if he is successfully to reconstruct the crime."

Mrs. Cammison looked at her guest in amazement. Did he really believe all this nonsense, or—no, she realised it now—he was talking away just to keep her mind off things, off that appalling vision of Eustace Bunnett sagging, a mess of bone and hair, inside the copper. Did he know how that vision was haunting her mind? Well, he had enabled her to forget it for a few minutes and she should be grateful for that. But did he also suspect the infinitely more horrible thing, that, as yet, she had not dared even to admit into the daylight of her mind—that she fought to repel, eyes tight closed, refusing so much as a glance at its dreaded features? Suddenly she felt frightened of Nigel. She wished that Herbert was here; but he had been called away to a case in the middle of dinner.

"You do knit a lot, don't you?" said Nigel. "You must have a packet of nephews and nieces."

"Yes," said Sophie. Then, answering the question that she felt (quite mistakenly) must lie behind Nigel's remark—"Herbert and I decided not to have children till—till we were more settled."

"How long have you been married?"

"Nearly three years. We married when Herbert bought his partnership here."

"You would make a very good mother, I should think."

Sophie felt she could not bear this line of conversation any longer. She might burst out weeping any moment. It was to kill this weakness that she said rather strenuously:

"But I don't see why you want to hunt criminals. I'm sure you can't enjoy it. You don't have to for a living. Do you believe in Justice or something?"

Nigel was gazing non-committally down his nose. "Hallo, what's this?" he said to himself. "What is making her attack me like this? What is she trying to hide from me—or from herself?" He said to Mrs. Cammison:

"I don't believe in justice in the abstract. Some crimes are 'just' and some actions are criminal. I suppose I do it because criminal investigation gives one an unique opportunity of studying people in the nude, so to speak. People involved in a case—particularly murder—are always on the alert, on the defensive, and it's when they're trying to cover up one part of their mind that they expose the rest. Even quite normal people start behaving in the most abnormal way."

"You sound quite inhuman," Sophie said in a trembling voice.

"No. There's nothing inhuman about curiosity. And mine is only trained, scientific curiosity. I'm sorry, though; I'm upsetting you, talking like this. I'm not a monster, really. To tell you the truth, I've pretty well made up my mind not to touch this Bunnett affair. Whoever did him in had every excuse, I should think."

"You're probably right there," said a deep voice from behind Nigel, "but I shouldn't talk too soon about giving the case up."

Dr. Cammison had entered, unnoticed by the other two. His square-jawed face, with its black jowl, swarthy complexion and deep brown eyes—together with his silent, unobtrusive, beautifully controlled movements as he closed the door and came up to them—made Nigel think of a black panther. His eyes regarded Nigel, bright and unwinking.

"Well," said Nigel, "how you do chop and change. Only this morning you were telling me to lay off the Truffles case. And now——! Ah, well; as old Tacitus said, *Supervacuus inter sanos medicus* or—we may roughly translate it—'When the doctor is amongst sane people, he appears even more vacuous than usual.' "

" 'Rough' is scarcely the word for that translation," said Dr. Cammison, his white teeth flashing in one of his sudden, rare grins.

"But Truffles dead is one thing and Bunnett dead is another."

"Adequately, if somewhat sententiously expressed."

"You see, a considerable number of people would have liked to see Eustace Bunnett liquidated—I apologise for the unfortunate accuracy of the term."

"So what?"

"So——"

"Herbert!"

The anguish of Sophie Cammison's voice struck Nigel like something solid hurled at him. He found himself for a moment quite breathless. Even Herbert's composure was ruffled. He looked doubtfully at his wife.

"It's all very well, my dear," he said slowly, "but——"

"Look here, you two," said Nigel, recovering himself. "I didn't want to gate-crash into your private troubles. It was obvious to me, from the moment I arrived, that Sophie had something on her mind— something to do with Eustace Bunnett."

"I thought—I don't see how you could think that," she interposed hurriedly.

"Whenever his name was mentioned, you had to steel yourself to behaving quite normally. And it showed. The one person a mimic cannot mimic successfully is his normal self."

"This is all getting rather metaphysical," said Dr. Cammison. "It's no use, Sophie. We've got to tell him. For all you know, we may be needing his help before long."

"His help?"—Understanding dawned in Sophie's eyes. She gripped the arms of her chair. It was the only way she could stop her hands shaking. Herbert leant over the back of her chair and put his hands on her shoulders. He began to talk, a touch of professional pedantry in his words.

"I had a good deal to do with Bunnett, one way and another. Soon after we came here, he wished to consult me. It was very awkward. Annerley was his doctor, and medical etiquette—as you know—does not permit one to treat another man's patient without his permission. I told Bunnett this, of course. He said that Annerley was a—er, that he was not satisfied with Annerley and that I would be a fool not to take the case. His money was as good as anyone else's. All that sort of thing. I told him —rather stiffly, I suppose—that we did not do things that way. It must have been the first time anyone had opposed him for years. He got very angry, raved about medical mumbo-jumbo, and so on. I thought that would be the end of it. But the next I heard was that he'd had a row with Annerley and refused to have anything more to do with him. Then he came to me again. Annerley was very decent about it. So that was that. I took Bunnett's case. He thought he'd got a gastric ulcer or peritonitis or something: in a regular panic he was. It was nothing of the sort, of course. I put him on a diet—the same diet, no doubt, that Annerley would have recommended, and he very soon recovered. Unfortunately, he then began to get matey with us, always inviting us down to dinner, sending cases of wine— that kind of thing. I couldn't stand the fellow personally, and I was beginning to hear things about the brewery that I liked still less. I couldn't imagine what his motive was, making up to me like this. Then it became painfully apparent. He, er——"

"He began to get fresh with me," said Mrs. Cammison. "Horrible little man! It was ludicrous, though; I couldn't help laughing at him."

"And Bunnett was not the sort of person calculated to enjoy the joke, was he?" said Nigel.

Herbert Cammison regarded him seriously. "No. He was not. And I may as well tell you at once that I think whoever removed him ought to be given free beer for the rest of his life by the State. He was the worst kind of anti-social pest, and decent society would clap him straight in jail —well, his type simply wouldn't be able to exist in a properly-run community. However, that's beside the point. His—er—advances to Sophie were only a symptom—of secondary consideration, really, compared to——"

Sophie Cammison chuckled. She was almost her own old equable self again for a moment. "Darling," she said, pressing her husband's hand, "I'm sorry my honour comes so low in your scale of values."

"Your honour can take care of itself—very efficiently, I should say," he replied with unimpaired gravity. "The employees at the brewery were less invulnerable. Anyway, after a bit Bunnett laid off Sophie—temporarily, at any rate. It was just then that I began to find out things about the brewery. A number of my panel patients were employed there, and there were far too many accidents and cases of occupational sickness. It's not my business to listen to gossip; on the other hand, I don't believe that a doctor should refuse to concern himself with social conditions. He ought to be at least as interested in preventing disease as in curing it."

"Hear! Hear!" said Nigel. "How admirable these quaint old Chinese beliefs are."

"We'll take what I heard first," proceeded Dr. Cammison, in the preoccupied tones of one lecturing a group of students over an operating-table. "I heard that Bunnett always employed married men where possible, so that he could have a stronger hold over them. I received the impression that his employees were really frightened of him—he was perpetually turning up in different places and standing silently behind them while they were at work—it got on their nerves, one of them told me, so that they began to get flurried and make mistakes; and then, of course, Bunnett had them where he wanted them."

"Yes, Sorn told me about a case of that this afternoon. Someone actually being sick—what was his name? Ed Parsons."

"Yes, and there was more to Ed Parsons' case than you know. Well, those are just examples. I heard a good many more. Of course, there are always chaps who can't live without a grievance, and no doubt some of what I heard was exaggerated. But there must have been a sizeable fire where one got such a hell of a lot of smoke. Things came to a head, as far as I was concerned, when I was called in to attend one of their lorry-drivers who had had a bad smash on Honeycombe Hill—just outside the town. From the evidence given in court afterwards, it was perfectly obvious that the driver had been overworked, compelled to run to an impossible schedule, and had dropped off to sleep through sheer exhaustion. Bunnett, being who he was, got off with the minimum fine: he celebrated the occasion by sacking the driver. That sort of thing goes on constantly, of course: it pays the employers—they gain more over the time and labour-saving than they lose over an occasional fine. Actually it wasn't the injustice of this sort of thing in the abstract that compelled me to take a hand; it was the effect of hearing that poor chap, in delirium after the accident, saying over and over again, 'I can't make it! Christ, I'm sleepy! It's bloody murder! I can't make it! The governor'll turn me off! It's bloody murder, that's what it is! I'm sleepy! Christ, I'm sleepy!'

"I'm tough as doctors go, Nigel, but that got me down. I tried to forget it, but I couldn't. The chap getting sacked on top of it was the last straw. I went to see Joe—Eustace's brother, you know: he runs the transport side. I as good as told him he was a murderer. He took it damned well—we've been friends ever since, actually; said he'd told his brother again and again it was asking for trouble making his drivers run to a schedule like that, but it hadn't had any effect. Poor Joe is a damned good sort, but Eustace always had him where he wanted him. However, this time Joe thought that—if he had a doctor's statement behind him (my name wasn't going to be brought in, of course)—he might be able to make some impression on Eustace. I thought I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, so I got Joe to show me over the brewery—I wanted to see exactly how far people had been exaggerating over the conditions there. Believe me, there hadn't been much exaggeration. I gave the place a pretty thorough look-over, from the hygienic point of view. I won't bother you with details: but the ventilation was appalling, and one didn't have to be a technical expert to see that the machinery and apparatus were nearly worn-out and thoroughly dangerous. Bunnett was the sort that has to squeeze the last ounce of work out of his machines as well as his men."

"But surely there are government inspectors who——"

"There are ways and means, young Nigel, of dealing with that difficulty. Eyewash and palm-grease, applied in equal proportions, will work wonders. And Eustace was an expert at applying them, I've no doubt. Well, I sent in a detailed report to Joe—about the conditions in the brewery, their effect on the health of the employees, etc., as well as about the lorry schedule. He was as keen as I to improve conditions all round. And he bearded brother Eustace with it. The next thing that happened, as far as I was concerned, was a note the day after requesting me to go round and see Eustace at the brewery. Eustace was sitting at the end of the long table in the board room, straightening a piece of blotting-paper in front of him. At least, I imagined it must be a piece of blotting-paper till he took it up in one hand, tapped it with his pince-nez, and said, 'I take it you are the author of this—er—document.' It was my report! Typed and unsigned, but he'd tumbled to it quick enough.

"After that, of course, there was hell to pay. He asked me by what right I interfered in another man's business. I told him that it was every citizen's duty to see that the laws were not broken. He asked me to state any laws *he* had broken. I quoted parts of the factory acts. Then he asked what I proposed to do about it. So I told him that, unless some changes were made pretty quick, I'd raise such a stink that even he, the omnipotent Eustace Bunnett, would have to knuckle under. He sat there for a while, fidgeting with a paper-knife and darting an occasional glance my way out of those cold little lizard's eyes of his. Then, to my surprise, he caved in. Said that I didn't look the sort to accept a handsome remuneration in return for a policy of non-intervention in the future—here he made a significant pause, but I was not nibbling at the bait. 'Very well, then,' said he, 'you win. Give me six months to make the alterations suggested in your report, and then I think you'll be able to come back and give us a clean sheet—hem, ha, sniff'—you know the sort of noises he made. I pointed out that it did not take six months to revise a lorry-running time-table. He hemmed and sniffed a bit, but finally promised to see to that at once. And he did. When Joe told me that the schedule had been altered, I felt convinced that I'd really put Bunnett on the spot. But——"

"But you found out the great truth," interrupted Nigel, "which inexperienced troops always have to learn—and pay for—that veterans are never so dangerous as when they give ground."

"Yes. Served me right for thinking I could run the whole show single-handed. Six months later, to the very day, Bunnett asked me to come and see him again. As I went through the brewery up to his private office, I looked around me—and it didn't look as if reconstruction had been done at all. So you can imagine I was not in too good a temper when I arrived in the Presence. Bunnett sat at his desk, pursing up his fat little mouth at me and rubbing his hands—they made a noise like a lizard's tail slithering over a stone wall. 'Ah, doctor,' he said, getting down to business at once, 'if I remember rightly, on your last visit here you said that it was every citizen's duty to see that the laws are not broken. Now I am sure, Dr. Cammison, that—as I prophesied last time you came here—you will see your way to giving us a clean sheet.' Even then I didn't know what he was driving at. He leant back in his chair and said, 'Kate Alpace.' Then I knew I was done."

"Kate Alpace?" asked Nigel, mystified.

"She is my sister," said Mrs. Cammison. "It was before we came here: when we were living in the Midlands. She had a lover and became pregnant. She asked Herbert to perform an abortion."

Herbert Cammison said, "I don't approve of abortion, as a general rule. But I happened to discover that there was insanity in Kate's young man's family. So of course I did it for her. Well, as you know, it's a criminal offence—penal servitude if you get found out."

"And Eustace Bunnett had found out?" said Nigel.

"Yes. He must have spent the six months I'd given him to improve his own business in making inquiries about me. Some shady private-inquiry agent, no doubt. That gives you an idea of what Bunnett was like, doesn't it? Heaven knows how his agents discovered it; it's irrelevant, anyway. The point was, if Bunnett had broken the law, so had I."

"Sort of stalemate," said Nigel.

"Worse. Exposure would have cost him pretty heavily in fines: but it would ruin my whole career. He was really in a strong position. Well, I generally have pretty good self-control, but that time I lost my temper. I told Bunnett exactly what I thought of him. Unfortunately, I also told him that people like him ought to be exterminated."

"Unfortunately?" asked Nigel. "You mean——?"

"Yes," said Cammison. "One of Bunnett's pleasant little practices—I forgot to mention it before—was to have one or two spies on the premises: it's not unknown in big business: the employer pays one of his employees to report to him any dissatisfaction, strike rumours and so on, he may hear in the shop. I'm terribly afraid that one of Bunnett's spies was listening-in on my little outburst."

"It looks as if I'd better stay on," said Nigel.

"You certainly had," said Dr. Cammison grimly. "Unless by any chance you were sitting outside my bedroom door all last night."

Nigel glared at him perplexedly.

"You see, otherwise there is no proof that I didn't visit the brewery last night and liquidate Bunnett."

"It will be awkward if the inspector turns up that row you had with Bunnett, certainly. Still, no doubt there are plenty of other people who had equally strong motives for doing him in."

"Very comforting you are, I must say."

"Oh, do stop talking about it as though it was a chess problem!" exclaimed Sophie Cammison. "Don't you realise that——"

"It's all right," her husband said gently; "I realise everything, don't you worry. And, by the way, young Nigel—as I *am* incriminating myself, I'd better do it thoroughly. Since that interview with Bunnett, Sophie and I had been living in—to put it mildly—a state of considerable uncertainty. For some time, he did nothing. But a few months ago, he started getting uppish with Sophie again. He as good as told her that he could ruin my career if he liked—and would, if she was not a bit more forthcoming. Yes, I know, it all sounds like a threepenny novelette; but there it is: Bunnett was not distinguished for literary good taste, anyway—as you discovered at the meeting. The point is, when Sophie told me about it I went to see Bunnett and informed him that—career or no career—I'd see him dead before I let him get away with that sort of thing."

"And now you have—er—seen him dead," said Nigel meditatively. "Yes, the situation is certainly a trifle daunting. However; courage, mes enfants. I will apply the gigantic resources of the trained mind. You reconstruct the anatomy, Herbert, and I'll reconstruct the crime. And then, Sophie," he added, "you can start knitting a wardrobe for your own children."

Chapter V

July 18, 9.15–11 a.m.

Watchman, what of the night?
ISAIAH (xxi, 11)

At exactly 2.17 the next morning Nigel had woken up with a bizarre, a wildly fantastic idea in his head. After breakfast he drew Herbert Cammison aside and said:

"Look here, I had an idea last night. Supposing that skeleton isn't Eustace Bunnett at all."

"Well, we don't know it is yet. But all the evidence points to it. Where is Bunnett, anyway, if it wasn't him in the copper? And why shouldn't it be?"

"It just struck me that it was a curious—an unnecessarily elaborate way of getting rid of him. I mean, why not just kill him and be done with it? Why go to all that trouble to destroy his identity—and yet leave his clothes and watch and ring and everything on him?"

"That's very simply explained. By putting the body in the copper, the murderer would succeed in effacing anything that would give us a clue to the method of the crime—that is, unless it was a blunt instrument affair. All traces of poisoning, say, or strangling, or even stabbing probably, would be destroyed."

"Oh, heavens!" groaned Nigel. "Of course. These midnight inspirations always look cock-eyed in daylight. I don't know why that didn't occur to me at once, though."

"Besides," continued the doctor, "if the remains were not Bunnett, yet are dressed up to make us believe that they are him—I'm getting ungrammatical—the deduction would be that it was Bunnett who did the murder. Unless there is a third party, X, who killed Y, and then persuaded Bunnett to exchange clothes with the corpse. And why should X do that—or Bunnett, for that matter?"

"X might have killed Bunnett as well."

"Now you're just asking for complications."

"That's true. Well, then, suppose for the sake of argument that there's no X. Bunnett would be the murderer then."

"But, my dear good Nigel, *why?* Why should he want to kill anyone—and kill himself in the process, which is what he'd be doing by dressing up the body to look like himself?"

"Search me!"

"I should think so! But seriously, Eustace Bunnett was the last chap to commit murder. Murder—even most unpremeditated murders included—is the last resort of the person who can't get his own way by any other means. Now Bunnett wielded, in his business, his personal relationships, and in this whole town, almost absolute power. He could get what he wanted, when he wanted, without killing anyone in the process—beyond an occasional lorry-driver. The only thing here he didn't get was Sophie: I was the obstacle to that: are you going to suggest that it's really me who was boiled in the copper?"

"All right, old boy, all right! Pax!" Nigel's irregular and somewhat discoloured teeth showed in a placatory grin. "As a matter of fact, I hadn't much confidence in my midnight inspiration all along; I was just wondering idly whether it could be put across on the inspector, supposing that he——"

"Supposing he started to get after me? Well, you could try it on him; but——"

Herbert Cammison grimaced and made a thumbdown gesture. "Well," he said, "I must be off to try and put Humpty Dumpty together again. Good hunting!"

"Good jig-saw!" responded Nigel politely.

As Nigel was walking down town towards the brewery half an hour later, he perceived Miss Mellors forging in his direction with purposeful strides. He glanced round furtively to see if there was any shop door into which he could retreat: no, nothing but private houses: he stood his ground, with the dour fatalism of the prairie-dweller who beholds the thundering herd galloping down upon him and can only hope for a speedy and conclusive kick on the head. At a distance of twenty yards Miss Mellors, raising simultaneously her ash-plant and her bull-like head, bellowed:

"Hoy! Mr. Strangeways! I want a word with you. Don't run away now!"

Nigel submitted to a handshake which nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket.

"Now, what's all this I hear about an accident down at the brewery, eh?"

"A—er—body was discovered there yesterday evening. It seems likely that it is Mr. Bunnett's."

The effect of this communication was devastating. Miss Mellors' huge and sanguine face grew suddenly pale. She seized Nigel's arm and exclaimed in an absurd, croaking little voice:

"But that's ridiculous. He's away cruising. In a boat," she added rather unnecessarily.

"Not Joe. Eustace Bunnett—that is, as far as we can tell at present."

Miss Mellors recovered herself very quickly. "My dear man," she expostulated in her ordinary, booming, loudspeaker voice, "my dear man, either the body is Eustace Bunnett or it isn't. There's no use making a mystery about it."

"I'm not making the mystery. It's the body—I mean, there isn't a great deal left of it, you see."

"Come along! You needn't be mealy-mouthed. I'm not a green girl, you know. You mean, the body was battered out of all recognition," said Miss Mellors, not without relish. "The work of a maniac, eh?"

"Not battered," replied Nigel, slightly irritated by the accusation of mealy-mouthedness: "boiled to rags, if you want to know."

"Really, now, that's most interesting," she boomed affably. "Tell me all about it."

Nigel gave her a short and guarded résumé of events. "A pretty ghastly business," he concluded.

"Ghastly business? Tripe. Don't be so conventional, young man. That Bunnett was a scoundrel, and had it coming to him. I'd have horsewhipped him long ago myself, only he was below my weight. I will say nothing about his private life"—Miss Mellors proceeded to discourse on that subject for a good ten minutes—"but apart from all that, the fellow was a poisoner."

"A poisoner?" ejaculated Nigel, considerably shaken. "Dash it all, I can't quite believe that."

"Strong drink, young man, is poison. You may not be aware of it, but ——" Miss Mellors gave an outspoken and exceedingly physiological lecture on the effects of alcohol. She concluded by reciting, in sombre but penetrating tones, emphasising the metre with taps of her ash-stick:

"Ha! see where the wild-blazing Grop-Shop appears,
As the red waves of wretchedness swell,

How it burns on the edge of tempestuous years—
The horrible lighthouse of Hell!"

"Well," said Nigel, "that may be so. But killing an odd brewery proprietor here and there is not going to have any effect on the drink trade. Presumably Joe will be carrying on the business, and——"

"Indeed he will not. Not if I have any say in the matter."

"And what say *will* you have in the matter?" Nigel was emboldened to ask. If it were possible for a Goddess of Public Works to blush, one might say that Miss Mellors did blush. She changed the subject quickly, saying:

"What was Bunnett doing in the brewery in the middle of the night, anyway? Snooping around, I'll be. Serves him right. Live and let live, I say," she added, somewhat inconsistently. "Well, cheerio!"

But that, of course, *was* the question, Nigel reflected as he proceeded on his way. How did the murderer get Bunnett into the brewery? The answer was to be supplied very soon. Nigel was stopped by a constable at the brewery gates. On giving his name, he was told that the inspector would like to see him in Mr. Bunnett's private office.

"Pursuant to Dr. Cammison's suggestion, I got into communication with the Yard last night. Sir John Strangeways vouched for you personally, so your position in respect to this case is now regularised," said the inspector. Nigel wished he would not talk this bogus sort of officialese: no doubt, it was meant to impress him with Tyler's superior education; oh, well, the main thing was that he now had some official standing.

"Well, how's things?" he said.

"We have just opened Mr. Bunnett's private safe. We found this, which may be of interest to you, sir." The inspector handed across a sheet of cheap, lined notepaper, on which was written, in block letters:

> *Dear Sir,—If you want to know where your bottled beer and sugar goes to, go to the brewery to-morrow night about 12 and ask the night watchman.*
>
> A WELL-WISHER

"Oh," said Nigel, "so that's what took him to the brewery. I was wondering. Envelope there too?"

"Yes, sir. Postmark, Weston Priors—that's a village about fifteen miles away. Dated July 15th, 7:30 p.m."

"I take it that the bird who wrote this is the murderer: which implies that the murderer had a pretty fair knowledge of the workings of the brewery—though we could have told that without this letter."

"Just so, sir," said the inspector, with a complacent superiority that Nigel found exceedingly irritating. "But there's one possibility that you've overlooked. And what is that possibility? This, Mr. Strangeways—the letter might be a bonerfidee anonymous letter; Mr. Bunnett, acting upon it, might have gone to the brewery and caught the night watchman pilfering; that might have led to an affray in which Lock—that's the watchman—killed Mr. Bunnett; whereupon, to conceal the evidence of his crime, he disposed of the body in the copper."

"H'm!" said Nigel politely; "that's certainly an idea. It seems to me to have two rather salient drawbacks, though."

"And what might they be?" asked the inspector, leaning back in his chair so that a roll of fat appeared above the back of his collar.

"First, the fact that this alleged well-wisher stated the day and hour at which Bunnett should come to the brewery suggests that he proposed to be waiting for him there. An ordinary anonymous letterwriter would have no object in stating the exact time. If the night watchman was a pilferer, he would be just as likely to be pilfering one night as another. Second, if the watchman did kill Bunnett, why didn't he put the body into one of the boiler furnaces? That would have destroyed all evidence of his crime completely; Bunnett would have disappeared and there would be no reason to suppose that he had ever gone to the brewery that night—the watchman couldn't know about the anonymous letter, of course."

"Ah, but if every criminal always did the most sensible thing, the Force would have to go out of business. Still, I'll allow there may be something in what you say. Now, sir, I had a talk with this Lock before he went on duty last night: and I found out one or two items of interest. First, he's a new man—only taken on a couple of months ago. Second, he works to a sort of time-table."

"Time-table?"

"Ah. He's supposed to visit every part of the brewery—the various store-rooms and processes, if you follow me, at stated times during the night. It's part of his job to see that the temperatures are kept right, the taps running proper, and so forth. He has a clock in a leather case on his wrist, that's set by radio time every evening. There's a schedule upon the wall of the little cubby-hole where he sits when he has a spare moment, showing what times these inspections must be made. Now, Mr. Strangeways, do you see the significance of that?"

"Well, you mean that—if he was doing his job properly—we should know exactly where he was at any time of the night."

"Yes and no, sir, yes and no. I looks at it this way. If he was doing his job properly, he should have been on one of his tours of inspection between 11.30 and midnight. Why then didn't he see Mr. Bunnett and the murderer—supposing there was a third party on the premises? You'd think he'd at least have heard a scuffle or something."

"I'm not so sure about that. The brewery is a big place, remember. If Bunnett was trying to catch out the watchman in some petty pilfering, he'd take good care not to be seen or heard. As to the murderer, he'd take equally good care to carry out his dirty work at a time when Lock was in another part of the building. As far as I can see, it only goes to show that the murderer had an exact knowledge of the way things worked in the brewery—which at least limits your number of possible suspects a bit."

"That's theory, sir, just theory, if you'll pardon me saying so. What I want is facts."

"Of course. And so say all of us. Have you got that schedule here?"

The inspector passed it across; then told the constable at the door to ask Mr. Barnes would he step this way for a minute. Nigel took up the schedule. The important period, if the anonymous letter was really part of the murderer's plan, must be around midnight: between 11.30 and 12.30 say, allowing a wide margin. The watchman's tour of inspection ended at midnight, he noticed; so it would be after midnight that Bunnett might expect to catch him out knocking back the bottled beer. For that reason, if it was the watchman who had killed him—presuming, of course, that he had not been getting down to the bottled beer before opening time—so to speak, the murder would have been committed soon after midnight. But that applied with equal probability if the murderer was not the watchman: he would be less likely to attack Bunnett while Lock was going his rounds than when he had retired again to his cubbyhole. However, as the inspector said, it was all theoretical. Nigel hastily made a copy of the schedule and was handing it back when the head brewer entered.

"This man Lock, now," said the inspector without preamble: "you say he's entirely trustworthy?"

"That's right. An old army man, he is. Had a job at Roxby's before he came to us."

"Had any small thefts lately—bottled beer, say, or sugar?"

Mr. Barnes raised his massive eyebrows, and his lugubrious face took on an appearance of what might almost have been called animation.

"Funny you should mention that. About three weeks ago, when we were checking up, we found there was a sack of sugar and a couple of crates of the light ale missing. How did you come to hear about it?"

"Information received," replied Tyler curtly. "Why weren't we informed about it at the time?"

"Ask the guv'nor, buddy, ask the guv'nor. Thought he'd do a bit of detecting like on his own. 'Barnes,' he says to me, 'Barnes,' he says, 'these local bobbies are no catch,' he says, 'if we're going to find out who's been lifting the stuff, we'll have to do it for ourselves,' he says."

"Well, go on," said the inspector, not without heat; "I haven't all day to listen to your reminiscences."

"So the guv'nor laid a little trap," continued Mr. Barnes blandly. "The stores was checked every night and morning for a week, see, so if Lock had been lifting anything we should've noticed, see. But there wasn't nothing missing then. Mind you, I'd have no objection to Lock taking a glass of beer at night—when the mood came on him, as you might say. But the guv'nor was a bit close that way. Soon after, his dog got into the open copper and he was rampaging about that, so the other business lapsed."

"Who did put Truffles into that copper, by the way?" asked Nigel mildly. "Now that his owner has—er—gone the same way home, there doesn't seem any point in keeping it dark any longer."

"Nor doesn't there seem any point asking about it in that case," replied Mr. Barnes, bending a glance of uncommon shrewdness in Nigel's direction. "Let the dead bury their dead, is what I say. But I couldn't tell you, sir, even if I wanted to. The guv'nor held an inquiry, mind you—fair turned the bleeding place upside down: but nothing came of it. Everyone could prove they was at work then—everyone except the accountancy office staff, that is, and myself and Mr. Joe."

"The office staff being?"

"Lily—that's my daughter—Mr. Bunnett's secretary, she was, and a couple of clerks."

"Um. I must have a talk with them some time."

"Well, gentlemen, if you've finished with me for the present, I'll be slinging my hook. The wheels of industry must be kept turning. So long." Mr. Barnes raised his eyebrows at them and slung his hook.

Inspector Tyler's temper was by no means improved by this interview. When the night watchman entered the room, Tyler said harshly:

"Now, then, Lock, what's all this I hear about your pilfering the brewery stores on the side, eh?"

"I don't know what you've heard, sir, but it's certainly not true."

"Never have a bottle of beer at night, eh? Must be a bit of temptation with all that lying around."

"Not for me, sir. I'm a teetotaller—ever since I left the army. Can prove it, sir."

The inspector sat back in his chair and fingered the anonymous letter. He said:

"Well, there's more things can be done with beer than drinking it—and with sugar, eh? What did you do—sell 'em to your friends?"

"No, sir. I don't know what you're trying to put on me—unless it's that theft as took place end of last month."

Lock had been standing at attention, very straight—a stalwart, grizzled man with many wrinkles at the corners of his steady eyes.

"What have you to say about this?" asked the inspector, pushing the anonymous letter to the far side of the desk. Lock took a brisk, military step forward, bringing up one heel against the other with a click, and took up the letter.

"Don't understand this, sir. That sort of scrounging—it wouldn't be worth while in a job like mine. You have to be honest—though I says it, as shouldn't—for a watchman's job. Ask my old regiment, or Roxby's—them's my last employers. They'll give me a clean sheet all right, I'll back."

"H'm. That's as may be. And you still assert that you performed your midnight round of inspection the night before last, and heard or saw nothing suspicious?"

"That is so, sir."

"Doesn't it strike you as peculiar that a murder should have been committed on these premises and you should know nothing about it? Have you no ideas at all how it happened?"

"No, sir."

"Yours not to question why, yours not to do—er—but it was Mr. Bunnett who died, wasn't it?" said Nigel in a friendly voice. "Y'know, Inspector, I'm inclined to believe him. I wonder, Mr. Lock, would you mind my looking at your hands."

The inspector started slightly; then said:

"What's all this? Palmistry? That's a new one on me."

"It's not the palms so much as the backs of the hands that interest me at the moment."

"That's all right, sir," said Lock, stretching out his hands.

Nigel peered at them closely, pulled up the sleeves and studied the man's wrists, then sat back in his chair.

"O.K.," he said. "Parade dismissed—as far as I'm concerned. I expect Mr. Lock will be wanting to go to bed."

"What's all the funny business about hands?" said the inspector suspiciously when Lock had turned smartly about and marched out of the room.

"You had an idea that Bunnett might have surprised Lock pilfering, that there was some sort of a struggle, Bunnett was killed or injured, and Lock put him into the copper. Well, now. If Lock drew a knife on him, you would have found traces of blood—or of cleaning up—on the scene. Did you?"

"No, sir. We went all over the brewery last night pretty carefully, and I admit there was no sign of that. But——"

"If Lock hit him over the head with a blunt instrument—or if anybody did—Cammison would probably have seen traces of it during his first examination. If he'd strangled Bunnett, there would have been scratches on the backs of his hands—quite likely marks on his face, too. There weren't. The only other possibility is that he should have used his fists, knocked him out: I don't think it's in the least likely that, if Lock had merely injured him, he would have gone on to murder him. After all, he hadn't enough at stake to justify that."

"A lot of 'ifs,' sir. I don't think you've proved anything."

"Not your sort of proof, possibly. But all that is comparatively unimportant. You know what's the worst crime in the army, don't you?"

"Why, I suppose——"

"Striking a superior officer. With all those years of discipline and tradition behind him, I'm prepared to assert that it was as good as impossible—physically and psychologically impossible—for Lock to have assaulted Bunnett. His immediate reaction, *if* he'd been caught knocking back an illicit glass of beer, would have been to spring to attention. And anyway—he's obviously an honest, trustworthy type of man. I've no doubt at all you'll find dozens of other people with infinitely better motives for putting Bunnett out of the way."

"You may be right," said the inspector, fingering his chin.

Just how right Nigel was, particularly in his last remark, was to be demonstrated sooner than either he or the inspector could have imagined.

Chapter VI

July 18, 1.30–4.35 p.m.

Let's choose executors and talk of wills.
SHAKESPEARE, *King Richard II*

Herbert Cammison, Sophie and Nigel had just sat down to lunch—or, to be more accurate, Sophie and Nigel had sat down, while the doctor was carving a chicken with the somewhat sinister absorption of one who is operating for an appendix but anticipates some intriguing complications. When the remains of the patient had been removed to the kitchen and Herbert had help himself to potatoes, salad, salt, butter and a glass of water with a deliberation that very nearly drove Nigel crazy, he said:

"Well, Felston and I have been working on that skeleton."

"I hope you had an enjoyable time," said Nigel politely. "And can these dry bones live? Will they sit up and answer to their name, if I may so express myself?"

"You may, young Strangeways. Up to a point, they will. We haven't any doubt that it's Bunnett."

"Oh, Herbert." Sophie no longer attempted to conceal the fear in her mind. She looked pathetically young and vulnerable, Nigel thought—almost like her own daughter might look at the age of fifteen, with those absurd horn-rim spectacles and her childlike fresh complexion.

"You mustn't worry, Sophie. I didn't kill him, as it happens, and the percentage of people wrongly convicted for murder is really very low."

Dr. Cammison began talking about their next holidays. Sophie seized on the subject with pathetic eagerness. No one was at all deceived; but it passed the lunch-time as well as anything might. After lunch Nigel took the doctor aside and asked for details.

"No signs of violence on the skull. No bones broken. The height corresponds pretty accurately with Bunnett's—five foot seven: of course, one has to allow a certain margin of error in a reconstruction like this."

"How much?"

"A couple of inches, at the very most. The hair, as I said originally, is the right colour. Tripp is still working on the dental plates, but he's pretty certain they're the set he supplied Bunnett with. Felston agrees with me that we've enough data to presume death. By the way, I rang up Tyler and told him our conclusion: he's going along to interview Grimshaw—that's Bunnett's solicitor—at three o'clock: the will: he's agreeable to your going along there, too, if you want."

"H'm. I wonder. . . . That man seems to have come over all respectful like. I'm not sure I don't prefer him with the gloves off."

"Tyler? A common or garden bully. Plays up to anyone in authority. Your uncle did that for you."

"Dear, dear! And I had been thinking it was the effect of my own masterful personality. Talking of which, by the way, what are your reactions to our Miss Mellors?"

"Just what do you want to know?"

"How keen is she really on her temperance stuff, for instance? Take it in her stride, so to speak, or a fanatic? What is there—or was there—between her and Joe Bunnett? How d'you think she'd shape as a murderer?"

"My dear Nigel!" Herbert Cammison for once looked startled. "What shocking ideas you do have! Ariadne Mellors a murderer! Come off it!"

"*What* Mellors?"

"Ariadne. Addie for short."

"Blow me down with an anchovy! Ariadne. Well, well, well. But this one walked out on Bacchus. However, one thing at a time. A fanatic?"

"No," said Herbert carefully. "I shouldn't say so. It's the organising part she's really keen on, more than the faith itself."

"Just like the Bishop of——?"

"I have no information about bishops," said Herbert with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, what about Joe Bunnett?"

"Joe?"

"Yes, she gave me the impression this morning that she has him on a string."

"Oh, I don't think so. They're good friends. Are you trying to deduce a romance between them?"

"Not exactly. Who would know about them, though?"

"We'll, we've not been here long enough. You might ask Barnes. Sophie *might* know, as a matter of fact: Joe has opened up to her occasionally. People do."

"Yes. I can imagine that."

Half an hour later, Nigel and Inspector Tyler were closeted with Mr. Grimshaw. "Closeted" seemed the only possible word, for the solicitor's office was exiguous and his long, sprawling legs took up most of the floor-space. While the formalities were being conducted, Nigel watched Mr. Grimshaw with fascination: his ears wiggled as he talked, which drew attention to the ginger-coloured hair that sprouted out of them; he also had a habit of munching before every sentence, as though the words would sound better if they were chewed up small.

"Now, Mr. Grimshaw, I don't think I need keep you long," the inspector was saying. "In an affair like this the question of motive has to be considered. That is why I am interested in the late Mr. Bunnett's will. Perhaps you would be good enough to inform me who the chief beneficiaries are, sir."

"Hum—mum—mum—nyah, I think we need have no hesitation about that. No. There are times when the law must have precedence over the lawyer. Mum-nyum. Mind you, in the ordinary course of things I should not countenance such an eeregularity; but, er—mnyum, desperate events reequire desperate remedies."

Looking, presumably, as desperate as he knew how, Mr. Grimshaw unfolded a document with a sharp crackle that made Nigel start, struck it negligently over the face, then peered at it with some distaste.

"M'm—yum, I should make it clear at the outset that I was not altogether satisfied with certain clauses in the will—as a man, not as a lawyer. In fact, I ventured—with considerable deefeedence—to remonstrate with Mr. Bunnett on these points. But, as you know, my client was a headstrong man, accustomed to having his own way, so of course I had to bow to his wishes. But really" (here the ears wiggled molto agitato) "the deeposeetion of the property is most peculiar. Most peculiar. It is as follows. Hum-mum-chumble-yum. Eustace Bunnett's share in the brewery is bequeathed to his brother, Joseph Bunnett, provided that he be unmarried at the time of the testator's death. Out of Eustace Bunnett's personal estate, an annuity of £100 is to be paid to his wife, Emily Rose Bunnett. There are a few minor bequests. The whole of the reseedue of his estate is bequeathed to Mrs. Annabel Sorn, provided she shall not have married again."

"Sorn!" exclaimed Nigel and the inspector simultaneously.

"Just so," munched Mr. Grimshaw, leaning back in his chair and gazing at his visitors with undisguised consternation.

"I considered the provision made for Mrs. Bunnett to be most inadequate—I speak," he added hastily, "in my private, not my professional capacity. But my client did not take my remonstrations in good part. By no means."

"Who is this Mrs. Sorn? Does she live here? A relation of Gabriel Sorn?" asked Nigel.

"Um-yum. She is domeeciled in the South of France. I have her address here." Mr. Grimshaw passed a slip of paper to the inspector. "My client averred that she was an old friend of his. It was to do her a kindness, I understand, that he took her son into the brewery."

"Oh, so Mr. Sorn is her son, is he?" said the inspector with visible relish. "Well. We shall see. Now, sir, can you give me any idea how much this Mrs. Sorn stands to gain by the will?"

"Let me see, now. It is impossible for me to tell you precisely, of course. But I should say that, when all the other bequests have been settled, death duties paid, and so on, Mrs. Sorn should receive something in the neighbourhood of £50,000."

"A tidy packet," said Nigel. "And what about Joe?"

"My late client held a controlling interest in the brewery. That interest now passes to Joseph Bunnett."

"And what has Joseph's position been so far?"

"Nyum-nyah, I believe that he was paid a salary as manager of the transport and the tied houses. He also had shares in the business."

The inspector took the names of the lesser legatees—the head brewer's was amongst them, thanked Mr. Grimshaw and made to depart. The solicitor munched a polite farewell. As they reached the door, Nigel turned and said:

"By the way, have you any idea why Eustace put in that proviso about his brother not being married?"

"Professionally speaking, no, my dear sir. But, if I may say so as a private indeevidual and without prejudeece—without prejudeece, of course—I should say that it was due to my late client's somewhat domineering tendencies. Please note, I am making no assertions. But when Mr. Joe returned from the war, an attachment sprang up between him and a certain young lady in this locality who must be nameless. It was shortly after this that my client inserted that proviso in his will. Hum-munch. I make no assertions, I repeat. But you may think it legeeteemate to draw a certain inference."

"And how did Miss Mellors take all this?" asked Nigel guilelessly. Mr. Grimshaw's ears performed an almost complete revolution.

"Hum-mum-chumble-yum," he exclaimed uncomfortably, "Really, my dear sir, I fear we are going outside out terms of reference. I really cannot admit——"

"Very well. We'll have it stricken from the records. Many thanks. Good-day."

"What's all this about Miss Mellors?" said the inspector when they were outside.

"In love with Joe Bunnett. Or was. Gave me two hints of it this morning. Nearly passed out when I told her Bunnett was dead—thought I meant Joe. Also said that Joe wouldn't be carrying on the brewery business if she had any say in it: which means, presumably, she *would* have a say."

The inspector's round and pasty face took on an unpleasing expression. It was, thought Nigel, like seeing a saucer of milk go sour before your eyes.

"Meaning, sir, that Joe Bunnett had been prevented by his brother from marrying Miss Mellors. So Miss Mellors and Joe conspire to murder Eustace, thus removing the obstacle to their marriage and gaining for Joe the controlling interest in the brewery."

"And they always say the police have no imagination! No, I don't mean all that. If Miss Mellors and Joe were in a conspiracy to murder Eustace, why should she come over all queer when I tell her that Bunnett's dead?"

"Ah, it takes them different ways. Don't you be so sure, Mr. Strangeways. I shall have to go into this."

"Joe's on the high seas, anyway. Or isn't he?"

"I've not contacted him yet, sir" (Nigel shuddered inwardly at the word), "but I'm expecting a report from the Poolhampton people any time now. Tollworthy is going round inquiring as to the whereabouts of everyone connected with Mr. Bunnett on the night of the murder. May not be much use. People would normally be in bed by that time of night, and that's about the most difficult alibi there is to break."

"Yes," said Nigel to himself, remembering Herbert Cammison, "and about the most difficult alibi to prove, also."

They were walking along a narrow street of mean houses away from the centre of the town, a street that every fifty yards or so gave itself a shake and set off again in a different direction. The street was dreadfully hot, and afforded disagreeable evidence of terminating in a cattle-market. Nigel thought longingly of his own flat that looked out upon a démodé but clean and beautiful London square. Just as the stench grew almost intolerable and an open piece of ground covered with whitewashed pens appeared, the inspector stopped at a squalid red-brick house.

"What have we come here for?" Nigel asked. "I really don't want to buy any fat stock at the moment."

"Maybe you'd fancy a pig in a poke," said Tyler with the challenging complacent air of one who has made a joke rather too subtle for the inferior wits of his audience.

"I'll buy it then. What is it?"

"This is Mrs. Bolster's house," said the inspector, banging again on the door, "where Mr. Sorn lodges."

"Here? Gabriel Sorn? God help us! But why? I didn't know he was a koprophil as well as a surrealist."

The door opened and a woman, who answered very aptly to her name, appeared.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Bolster. Is your lodger in? I'd like a word with him."

"Mr. Zorn's out just now. He always goes for a walk on Zaturday aafternune. He'll be back to tea any minute now, though."

"We'll wait for him, then. May we step inside?"

"Surely. This way, gentlemen, if you please."

Mrs. Bolster let them pass and closed the door behind them. The passage was almost pitch-dark and impregnated with a complex and peculiarly noisome odour, of which one could predicate nothing but that its basis seemed to be rotten fish.

"Will you wait in the parlour?" she asked.

"No, I think we might as well go straight to Mr. Sorn's room. One thing, Mrs. Bolster. I'm investigating the murder of Mr. Bunnett, and we have to find out—just as a matter of routine—the whereabouts of everyone connected with him on Thursday night. Mr. Sorn was at a party till 11.15 or so. I suppose he got back about half-past?"

"Yes, sir. Haaf-paast to the tick, it was. Our Bertha had the toothache fair cruel that night and I was zitting up with her. Very poorlee she was."

"I suppose you locked up after him, then?" said the inspector, looking a trifle dashed.

"Oh, no, sir, he always locks up himself. He often goes for walks at night, you see, sir. Many's the time I've toold him the night air's no good for man or beast, but he will do it. A queer gentleman in his habits, but he pays up his rent regular."

"Did he go for one of his walks on Thursday night?"

"That I cannot tell you, not for sure. I thought I did hear him go downstairs again, me being awake with our Bertha, who was poorlee that night. Walking very quietlee he was, as he always does at night, not being wishful to wake us up. A very conziderate gentleman, Mr. Zorn, I will say that."

"I'm sure he is," said the inspector heartily. "You didn't actually hear him go out, then?"

"No, sir, I caan't say as I did. Oh, dearie me! I was forgetting. I must be fair mazed. Why, it was only laast night, when I brought in his supper, Mr. Zorn says to me, 'Bolster,' he says, that being his way of called me, and I always said it was disrespectful, but you can't pick and choose with your lodgers nowadays, 'Bolster,' he says, 'I hope I didn't wake you up last night when I came in.' I told him I was awake with our Bertha along of her being poorlee with the toothache. So Mr. Zorn he says he hadn't felt too happee in his inzides that night so he'd gone downstairs to fetch a book in case he couldn't go to zleep. So I must have heard him, see, when he was fetching the book."

"Yes. That was it, no doubt," purred the inspector. "Well, now, if you will show us Mr. Sorn's room, I don't think I need trouble you any more."

The most noticeable thing in Gabriel Sorn's room was an extraordinary, confused, scurrying, metallic noise—as though one had walked into a kind of mechanical ant-heap. That, indeed, was the only noticeable thing, for the room was even darker than the passage outside.

"An infernal machine, that's what it must be," thought Nigel fatalistically. "Sorn has left it here to blow up the incriminating evidence and the detectives. Neat, if unfortunate."

Mrs. Bolster drew back the curtains, saying:

"Mr. Zorn must've been writing at his poetree before he went out. Always makes it up easiest in the dark, he says."

"Like developing a photograph? Quite a sound principle," said Nigel, his eyes tight shut against the imminent explosion and the painful dazzle of the sunlight that was now pouring in.

"Ah, quite a lot of things can get done in the dark, eh, Mr. Strangeways?" said the inspector with ponderous significance.

"Please, Inspector! We are not in the smoking-room now," protested Nigel, slowly opening his eyes. "Wouldn't it be a good plan to put the bomb into a bucket of water—before it blows us all up, I mean."

"Bomb!" exploded the inspector. "Bomb! What's all this about a bomb? You got a touch of the sun, sir?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. The error, I perceive, was mine. So Sorn is a chronometrophil as well as a koprophil. I wonder how many there are."

Nigel began to walk around the room, counting the clocks in it. "Reading from left to right," he said, "we have a grandfather clock; a cuckoo clock; two timepieces of Swiss origin, very rare and curious, depicting respectively a gnome hammering an anvil and a coach with its rear wheel revolving in jerks; on the mantelpiece a marble clock, weighing probably a ton, surmounted by a pair of all-in wrestlers who are clearly not trying very hard; also two travelling clocks; a wall clock, done in fretwork, with most of its entrails dangling out; a more modest clock, coyly peeping out of red plush; a ditto, ditto, green plush; eleventh and lastly, a combined clock, calendar and barometer—no doubt it tells fortunes as well and gives nightly talks to the cultivation of mangelwurzels. Well I never did. And do all these clocks belong to Mr. Sorn?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Mrs. Bolster. "They're faather's."

"A collector, is he?"

"No, sir. Faather's religious, you see. He had a vision that the Zecond Coming was to be at midnight on April 3rd laast year; and wanting to be punctual and readee like, you see, he used to go round they auctions buying up clocks. He set them all up in yurr, so that if one or two went out of order suddenlee, he'd still know when to have his loins girded up notwithstanding. Then, when the Zecond Coming didn't happen, he hadn't the heart to get rid of them. It'd got to be a habit, you see, winding them up every day. But he wouldn't live in this room any more, being a disappointed man, as you might say, so we let it to Mr. Zorn."

"I see," said Nigel.

Mrs. Bolster curtsied, to the extent that her figure allowed it, and retired. Nigel prowled about the room. The chairs and sofas were of a startling variety of shape but looked all uniformly uncomfortable. The book-case contained a most extraordinary conglomeration of books: the plays of Shakespeare rubbed shoulders with an earnest work on *How to Develop Self-Confidence;* next to them came *Freud's Introductory Lectures,* a complete Ella Wheeler Wilcox, bound—apparently—in sponge, a manual on cycling, *From Powder Monkey to Admiral,* the Sermons of the Rev. Spurgeon, *The Care of Mules, The Divine Comedy, The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti, Rovering to Success.* The pictures represented, in the main, courting scenes of the eighteenth century; consumptive blondes, splayed out on rustic benches or posed before marbles urns, received the addresses of improbable-looking young men in three-cornered hats, riding-boots and skintight breeches. The insipidity of these pictures was relieved by a bloater hung from the frame of one, and a pair of braces festooned over another.

"You know," said Nigel with awe, "this chap Sorn really is admirably consistent. What with the cattle bellowing outside, the clocks clacking away inside, the books, the pictures and all, he has created a perfect surrealist environment."

"I'll surrealist him," growled the inspector. "Where did he take his walk on Thursday night, eh? Filling up Mrs. Bolster with that stuff about fetching a book!"

"Did you observe, though, the *time* when——?"

Nigel's point, whatever it might be, was drowned by an outburst of hellish din. The metallic torrent of ticking dwindled: a cuckoo shot out of the cuckoo clock and gave an excellent imitation of an owl hooting on a gallows tree; then there was a general wheezing, rumbling, hawking, belching, twanging and tittuping as the remaining ten clocks cleared their throats preparatory to striking four.

"Really," shouted Nigel, "I think it was just as well the Second Coming didn't happen. Father Bolster'd have to have a remarkably sharp ear to catch the Last Trump in the middle of all this shindy." As the hullabaloo died away, the door opened and Gabriel Sorn came in. When he saw them, his mobile, weak mouth involuntarily was drawn into a stubborn pout and his whole face seemed to close up. Nigel snapped his fingers: at last he had discovered who it was that Sorn resembled.

"I'm surprised to see you indoors on a fine afternoon like this, Inspector," said Sorn with rather ghastly levity. "May I sit down? Do you wish me to face the light, or anything fancy like that?"

The inspector brushed all this aside. His huge face rose up horrifically out of his uniform, pallid and somehow amorphous, like a giant ray, thought Nigel.

"Now, sir, there are one or two questions I have to ask you. First, how long have you been aware of the contents of the late Mr. Bunnett's will?"

"That's easy. I don't know anything about it yet."

"You were not aware, then, that he left the greater part of his estate to"—the inspector paused a second, scrutinising Sorn carefully—"to your mother, Mrs. Annabel Sorn?"

The young man's face took on an expression of almost theatrical surprise and consternation.

"My mother?" he gasped. "But that's—I mean, why should he?"

"That's what I was hoping you'd tell me."

"Oh, I see," said Sorn, recovering himself. "Motive. But you can't put anything on my mother: she's in France, you know. Or is it me you're after? Of course: Son kills Employer to save Widowed Mother from Destitution. How vulgar of you!"

Sorn spoke through his nose in the snuffling voice that once was associated with Puritans and now, by some curious freak of succession, has been inherited by the aesthetic.

"We shall be going into all that," said the inspector, no more disturbed by all this than was Carson by the barbed witticisms of Oscar Wilde. "Will you please tell me what was your association with the deceased, how it arose, etc.?"

"He was an old friend of my mother's. Soon after I left the university, he offered to take me into the brewery as a pupil; I believe there was some idea of my becoming a partner, if I 'made good'—as you'd probably express it."

"I see. Salary?"

"Oh, I got a little. It doesn't amount to more than pocket money: and I have a small allowance from my mother. As you imply, I had every incentive to murder the old ruffian."

"So you *did* know about the will, eh?"

"No, I didn't, I'm not admitting anything. If you can't understand——"

"You know, Sorn," Nigel interposed, "I should lay off the irony. The inspector understands facts, but not figures of speech."

"Where were you on the night of the murder?"

"In bed."

"That's funny. Your landlady says she heard you creeping downstairs again not long after you'd come in from the party."

"Oh, yes," said Sorn, a little too quickly. "I came down to fetch a book."

"What book?"

"The Great Wall of China, by Kafka, 7s. 6d. net." It all came very pat.

"Then how do you account for the fact that you were seen near the brewery gates not very long after midnight?"

Nigel sat up abruptly. The first he'd heard—oh, no, it was a long shot of the inspector's, and very definitely below the belt, too. Of course, Tyler could always say it was a case of mistaken identity if Sorn tried to make a fuss about it. But there was no need. Sorn's bravado collapsed. He hadn't the nerve to carry through his own deception: his mouth twitched and saliva appeared at the corners of it.

"I don't—I suppose I can go for a walk, damn your eyes, if I want to."

"A curious time to choose for a walk, eh?"

"Poets have curious habits, my good Inspector."

"Such as—working in the dark, eh?"

"Yes, if you like." Then Sorn perceived the double-entendre. "I wasn't in the brewery, I had nothing to do with it, how dare you bully me like this!" His snuffling voice rose into a dismal falsetto: Nigel felt hot and embarrassed.

"No one is accusing you of anything—yet," said the inspector. "Why did you prime Mrs. Bolster with this tale of going downstairs to fetch a book?"

"Because, if you must know, when we found Bunnett in that copper and they said he must have been killed the night before, I knew you'd be coming nosing round asking where I'd been."

"I think," Nigel pointed out in his most dispassionate voice, "that is actually in Mr. Sorn's favour. If he'd committed the murder, he'd have attempted to establish his alibi as soon as possible. As it was, he didn't do so until the evening after—at supper, Mrs. Bolster said."

"H'm. That is as may be, but——"

"Stop it!" cried Sorn. "Will you stop it! I tell you I didn't do it!—talking about me as if I was something under a microscope! Don't you see—it's silly, I mean—I couldn't—this sort of thing can't happen to me! And now you've made me feel very ill: I've got a headache: I wish you'd go away," he added, snuffling ridiculously.

"Control yourself, sir. Will you kindly tell me exactly where you went for your walk, with approximate times?"

After a good deal of trouble, this was elicited. Sorn claimed to have gone out again between 11.30 and 11.45, to have walked down Long Acre, over the railway bridge at the south end of the town, then turned right along the outskirts of Honeycombe Park, and so down Honeycombe Hill into the town again. He had passed the brewery gates, he supposed, about twenty to one.

"Your statement is that you didn't enter the brewery, then?"

"Of course I didn't. How many more times do I have to——? And if——"

"You saw or heard nothing suspicious? No lights on the premises?"

"No. Unless you call a man on a motor-bike suspicious."

"Oh, dear, dear," thought Nigel. "Guilty or innocent, the young fool is now going to be too clever." With ponderous and quite transparent geniality, as though he might be saying to an errant motorist, "Oh, you were driving at twenty-five miles an hour, were you?" the inspector took up this point.

"A motor-bicyclist, eh? And where might you happen to have seen him?"

"When I'd got—oh, almost fifty yards beyond the brewery, I heard a motor-bike being started up somewhere behind me and ridden away in the opposite direction."

"And this cyclist of yours came out of the brewery yard, did he?"

"He's not a cyclist of mine. And I don't know where he came from—or even if it was a man: it was far too dark. He might have been visiting at one of the houses opposite. All I know is that he hadn't passed me as I came into the town. I'm surprised," Sorn added with an accent of suspicion, "that whoever it was saw me passing the brewery didn't see this cyclist."

"Very surprising, I'm sure, sir, *very* surprising," replied the inspector, heavily sarcastic.

"But I tell you——" wailed Gabriel Sorn.

"Oh, forget it!" Nigel said impatiently: "it can be verified easily enough, one way or the other. There *is* a question I should like to ask you, though, Sorn."

"Go ahead. Don't mind me. Only please don't ask me again if I committed the murder. I do find repetition tedious," said Sorn, something like his old self again.

"No, it's not that. I just wanted to ask how long it is that you've known Eustace Bunnett to be your father."

Gabriel Sorn's whole head jerked back, as though a fist had been aimed at it. Then his face was suffused with blood and he sprang at Nigel viciously. The inspector had quite a job pulling him off and dumping him down in his own chair again. After a little the glare went out of his eyes; he smiled a wry smile and panted:

"I apologise—how primitive one's reactions are—devoted son defends mother's honour—I'll thrash the cad who calls my mother a—too terribly Victorian and feuilleton-ish."

"So you did *know?*" said Nigel gently.

"I didn't know. Suspected, if you like. A certain unfortunate resemblance in feature did begin to obtrude. Really, too humiliating. I wonder nobody else noticed it."

"It's very slight. It didn't occur to me—except that you vaguely resembled someone I'd met—till I heard that clause in the will. That explains the bequest, I suppose."

"I suppose so. But there's something else—something I can't explain anyhow," said Gabriel Sorn in a voice they had not heard before.

"What's that?"

The young man's voice was almost inaudible; he wasn't really talking to them at all.

"Why my mother ever—how could she go with that swine, Eustace?"

Chapter VII

July 18, 9–10.15 p.m.

It was a maxim with Foxey—our revered father, gentlemen—'Always suspect everybody!'
DICKENS, *Old Curiosity Shop*

"I never thought I could fancy a drop of beer again," said Sergeant Tollworthy. "But you never knows till you tries, do you?"

Herbert Cammison and Nigel applauded this neat statement of empirical philosophy, the sergeant took a hearty draught and wrung the moisture from his moustache back into the tankard. It was nine o'clock on the same evening. The sergeant seemed to be enjoying a brief respite from his labours, sitting with his collar unfastened and a pint of beer at his side in Herbert's most comfortable arm-chair. Sophie had gone up to bed early: a bad headache.

"Suppose I really oughtn't to be accepting your hospitality, seeing as I'm here partly on a matter of business, doctor," said the sergeant. "Still, I never did hold with red tape, and there's a bleeding sight too much of it in the Force."

He took another and more contemplative draught.

"I thought it was only suspects you weren't allowed to drink with," said Dr. Cammison, eyeing the sergeant keenly. "Got me on the list, too, Jim?"

"In a manner of speaking, sir, yes. Of course, you and I know one another. You knows I've got my duty to do, and I knows you're O.K., so what I says is—why shouldn't we have a friendly drink on it? Combine business with pleasure like?"

"A very sound sentiment, nobly conceived and nobly expressed," said Nigel. "Well, here's wishing."

"You see, doctor," Tollworthy explained, "it's this way. I wouldn't've come bothering you myself, but that Tyler—he's a fair terror, he is, and no lie. No respecter of persons, Tyler isn't; and seeing as how certain information had come to his ears, he sent me up here—just as a matter of routine, sir, I need hardly say—well, the fact of the matter is he wants to know where you was on the night of the murder, the silly chump."

Sergeant Tollworthy, having got this out of his system, broke into a profuse perspiration, sighed with relief, produced a red and white handkerchief the size of a medium bath-towel and mopped himself.

"The night before last?" said Cammison. "We had a party. The guests were all gone by 11.30. Strangeways and I had a last drink. Went up to bed about quarter to twelve. In bed the rest of the night. No witnesses, I'm afraid. I sleep in a different room from my wife, and the maid was presumably snoring in the attic."

"That's good enough for me, sir," said the sergeant, raising his hand in a point-duty gesture. "You was in bed, and we'll leave it at that—inspector or no inspector. Mind you, sir, I didn't want to come up here—official, I mean. It's that Tyler. Suspicious, he is. Ar, a very suspicious man, Tyler. He'd suspect the backside off Hare Tiler, Tyler would. Give him half a chance, and he'd suspect the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Well, it's his job after all, isn't it?" said Herbert.

"Job be blowed! There's no sense I can see in stirring up trouble. But Tyler's suspicious, y'see. A very low view of human nature that man has."

"Have some more beer?"

"Thank you. I won't say no. . . . Here's your very good health, sir, and yours, sir."

"Didn't you say some special information had come to Tyler's ears, though?" pursued Dr. Cammison.

Sergeant Tollworthy looked exceedingly embarrassed. He fingered his neck-band, shifted his feet, breathed heavily; then blurted out:

"It's that bastard, Feather, been making trouble."

"Feather? You mean——?"

"Ar. Him that works in the brewery. Came along to the station this evening and said he had some information to lay, the shifty little——, if you'll pardon the expression, gentlemen. If I had that Feather standing up at the wicket, just for one over, I'd bowl him some information: just one over, and there'd be nothing left of him barring what they scraped off the sight-screen. Information? Pah!"

"But what did he say?"

"Says he overhead a quarrel between you and Mr. Bunnett down at the brewery a while back. Says he heard you say you'd see Bunnett dead before you left him get away with something or other; so when Mr. Bunnett is murdered, he puts two and two together—this Feather does—

and comes along to Tyler with the answer. That's *his* story. Had quite a bit of trouble to keep my hands off the ruddy little liar, I did."

"Unfortunately it's quite true—the quarrel part, I mean. We had a row about the conditions in the brewery, and no doubt Bunnett saw to it that this spy of his was listening in somewhere."

"Is that so, sir? That's bad, isn't it? Awkward like for you, I mean. Of course I know very well you didn't do it. But that Tyler, being a suspicious chap—Oh, well, least said, soonest mended. But that's not the worst of it. Tyler says to me, 'What for does the murderer put the body in that there copper?' he says, 'Why,' he says, 'to destroy evidence of how the crime was committed. Which suggests that the murder was done in such a manner as to give away the murderer supposing there was remains. Now,' says Tyler, 'who's more likely to be able to kill someone in a specialised sort of way than a doctor—drugs, poison, or a neat bit o' work with a knife'—begging your pardon, sir. But there it is, you see. Quite bright for Tyler, really."

"Alas," said Nigel. "I'm afraid *I* fathered that sinister idea on him. Still, there are other ways of looking at it. The night-watchman, according to this schedule, was due to visit the platform where the coppers are at about ten minutes before midnight. The murderer might have killed Bunnett up there, then heard the watchman coming or known that he was due, and chucked the body into the copper in a hurry, just to get rid of it."

"You're not in your best form, Nigel; I could puncture that in about twelve places. As for instance: whoever did the job must have been familiar with the workings and geography of the brewery; therefore he would have taken care to do it when and where the night-watchman was certain not to be coming."

"Yes," said Nigel abstractedly. "What's worrying me is why he put old Bunnett into the copper at all. It was either part of the murderer's plan, or it was done on the spur of the moment. Your argument, Herbert, seems to dispose of the second alternative. Why was it part of his plan, then?"

"Sort of poetic justice, sir," said Tollworthy, "chucking him into his own beer?"

"*Poetic* justice? I wonder. Gabriel Sorn, of course. That is a possibility."

"Just a blind fit of rage?" suggested Cammison.

"But that would imply the whole crime was unpremeditated, and the anonymous letter contradicts that."

"Not necessarily," said Cammison. "A certain type of character—the moral weakling, sensitive, neurotic type, to put it roughly—would be apt to see red *after* the first blow was struck. You know, the sort of chap that would run over a cat in his car, and then get out and pretty well beat it to a jelly; it's fear, really; a combination of fear and sadism."

"Yes, there was a lad like that at my school. Timid, bullied, solitary. One day another boy was ragging him, and this lad turned on him and knocked him down with a lucky blow, and then he damned nearly beat out his brains on the floor. It took three of us to pull him off, and the other chap was in the san' for a fortnight. But would that type ever work out a murder and screw himself up to striking a first blow? That's what I doubt."

"I should say it was unlikely, but not impossible," Cammison replied. "The type we have in mind is probably a phantasy-builder. He would work out the execution of the murder in phantasy; he would be quite capable of sending the anonymous letter and even going to the brewery himself. In the ordinary course of events he would stop there. But, supposing he was discovered by Bunnett lurking about the place, supposing there was any sort of a row, his phantasy murder might actually be committed in real fact—in self-defence, almost. Once he'd knocked him silly, he might quite well taste blood—so to speak—and do the thing properly."

"Yes, that's reasonable, I think. Again, the cap seems to fit that wretched Sorn most accurately. One can't call the head brewer, for instance, or Miss Mellors a phantasy-building neurotic."

Nigel was wondering, though, who it was who had been recently described to him as "a bit of a moral weakling!" Not Gabriel Sorn, surely. No, Sophie had used the phrase about Joe Bunnett.

"Then again, there's the possibility of dementia praecox. What they call 'dual personality,' Jim," Dr. Commison said. "The mind becomes split and its two parts work alternately. It's what's behind those cases of clergymen and schoolmasters of the most exemplary character suddenly committing indecent assaults in trains. Your murderer may be some normally harmless chap—and quite unaware of what he's done. Jekyll and Hyde, you know."

"Give us a chance, doctor," protested the sergeant. "You'll be telling me next it was Tyler, or your own missus, who did it."

Nigel said, "I wonder whether a deliberate, conscious splitting of the personality can make the subject specially prone to the morbid condition. Sorn, for instance, seems to keep himself pretty successfully in two separate compartments. He's quite a different person in the brewery from what he is chez Bolster."

"That I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Anyway, it's all very abstract. What we want is some more facts. How about that anonymous letter, Sergeant? Is anything being done about that?"

"We've had a man on it, sir. The afternoon collections in Weston Priors are taken at 2.20 and 7.20. The letter must have been put in the box between those times, so I've been inquiring about people's movements on the afternoon of the 15th as well as the night of the 16th and 17th. Here's a list of people Tyler gave me, with their statements filled in. Care to have a look?"

"My hat!" exclaimed Nigel, glancing at the sheet of paper, "your inspector certainly is pretty broad-minded in his choice of suspects." He read it out to himself.

Name	*2.20–7.30 (July 15)*	*11.30 onwards (July 16–17)*
G. Sorn	In brewery till 5.30 p.m. (corroborated by H. Barnes and others). In lodgings 5.35–7.30 (Corroborated by Mrs. Bolster).	Out walking from 11.40 to 12.45 approx. (no corroboration yet).
H. Barnes	In brewery till 5.30 p.m. (corroborated by G. Sorn, etc.). Arr. at Stag's Head 7.5 and remained there till 8.15 (corroborated by barman, etc.). On own statement motoring in country between 5.30 and 7.5: route given (no corroboration given yet).	In bed (corroborated by wife).

Name	*2.20–7.30 (July 15)*	*11.30 onwards (July 16–17)*
Mrs. Bunnett	2.20–4.0 p.m. resting (partially corroborated by maid). Tea-party 4.15–5.30 (corroborated by Mrs. Amberley). 5.30–7.30, in garden and dressing for dinner (corroborated by maid).	In bed (no corroboration yet).
J. Bunnett	Arr. Royal Lion, Poolhampton, 3 p.m. (corr. by porter, etc.). Movements during rest of day corr. by Elias Faulkes—in charge of Bunnett's boat, *The Gannet*—Hotel staff, etc.	No evidence. Presumably at sea. *The Gannett* put out from harbour 7.45 p.m. (corr. Elias Faulkes, etc.).
E. Parsons	In brewery till 5.10 p.m. (corr. by J. Stokes, etc.). Took Lily Barnes for ride on motor-bicycle—route given; did not go within 10 miles of Weston Priors (no corr. yet except by L. Barnes). Ret. 7.20 (corr. H. Barnes).	At dance till 11.30 p.m. Left with Lily Barnes—joy ride in country. (corr. by L. Barnes). L.B. ret. to her house, 12.30, (corr. H. Barnes). E.P. ret. to lodgings 12.15 approx. (corr. by landlady).
A. Mellors	Refuses to state whereabouts from 2.20–3.30 3.30–4.30 making jam (corr. by maid). 4.30–6.30 committee meeting (corr. by Rev. Summers). 6.30–7.30 gardening (corr. by neighbours).	In bed (no corr.—lives alone in house).

Name	*2.20–7.30 (July 15)*	*11.30 onwards (July 16–17)*
H. Cammison	? ?	? ?

"Um. I doubt if the July 15th column is much help. There are so many more ways of getting a letter posted than dropping it into the box oneself. Barnes, Mrs. Bunnett, Joe Bunnett, Parsons and Miss Mellors all might have done it, as far as we know at present."

"What's all this about?" asked Herbert.

"Question of who posted the anonymous letter, at Weston Priors between 2.20 and 7.20 on the 15th. You'd better fill up your little space while we're about it."

"The 15th? Dear me, I was over at the Eglinton's that afternoon. Passed within a couple of miles of Weston Priors on the way back—you know, Jim, the road-fork at Aldminster. I seem to be qualifying rapidly for the rôle of first murderer."

Sergeant Tollworthy laughed heartily. "Well, sir, you will have your little joke. If you'll just let me have the details——I expect Tyler'll want me to go routing after the A.A. man at Aldminster and such like."

Cammison gave them. Nigel was studying the list. "I see you've got Ariadne down. Why wouldn't she tell you where she was that afternoon?"

"Search me, sir. Blew up very strong about it, she did; said her private affairs were nothing to do with a bunch of nosey-parker policemen. I felt like a house of cards in an earthquake, and no error. We'll have to look into it, I suppose. If Miss Mellors was anywhere on the blinking landscape, somebody couldn't have helped spotting her."

"I see this Ed Parsons has got a motor-bike," said Nigel. "I suppose the inspector told you Sorn's story to us about the masked raider and all."

"Masked? Cor! I never heard he was masked."

"Figuratively speaking. By blackest midnight masked from human view. Blank verse."

"Ar. Tyler's going after Parsons himself. His landlady might have made a little mistake about when he got in, and that Lily Barnes—a saucy bit—she *said* she was joy-riding with him, but——"

"But why should Ed Parsons do in Bunnett? Had he a motive, too? Is there anyone in the whole town and county who hadn't got a motive?"

"Knowing Bunnett, I should be inclined to doubt it," said Cammison grimly.

"Ed Parsons'd had a bit of trouble with Mr. Bunnett. About the lorry-loading. Case of some of the lorries being overloaded. We brought it into court. Young Ed said he had only acted on instructions from Mr. Bunnett, which Mr. Bunnett denies very vigorous. Ever since then, according to my Gertie who used to be regular thick with Lily Barnes—Lily being sweet on young Ed—Mr. Bunnett made his life a fair hell for him—always chivvying him about and finding fault and that. Got on his nerves, you might say. And that's not the whole of it. My Gertie told mother that Lily's been put in trouble and blames it on Mr. Bunnett, though you needn't let that go beyond you for the present, seeing as Gert told mother confidential."

"Yes, that's motive enough, I suppose. But I can't see that, if Parsons had murdered Bunnett, he'd advertise his presence by roaring out of the brewery gates on a motor-bike at midnight."

"That's right, sir. And Parsons is a decent, straight youngster too—a sight too good for that Lily, if you ask me."

"I wonder did Mr. Barnes know about his daughter being in trouble."

"That's what Tyler would ask, too. Only I've not told him about Lily yet." The sergeant shifted his feet and tugged his moustache uneasily. "I was just thinking, sir—if I might be so bold—would you have a word with Lily first yourself. You being unofficial like, she might be more willing to talk to you than to us."

"Mm. I don't know that I fancy myself as a squire of errant dames. Still. Yes, I'll do it. I've got to talk to her anyway about this Truffles business. What's the news from the Poolhampton front, by the way?"

"Mr. Joe Bunnett arrived there in his car about 3 o'clock. Spent the rest of that afternoon getting in stores, petrol for his engine and that——"

"Petrol for his engine?" said Nigel. "Didn't—surely Sophie told me that he despised engines, wouldn't have anything but sail?"

Herbert Cammison said, "Yes, he's a regular old shellback. But he told me he was putting in an auxiliary engine this cruise as he hadn't found anyone else to go with him and didn't care for the idea of managing the boat single-handed at his time of life, with nothing but sail. Very sensible. He's getting on for fifty, you know, and he's no Viking in physique."

"I see. And since, what is it—7.45 p.m. on Thursday, he's been sailing westward, has he?"

"Yes, sir. We've warned all the places he may put in—Lyme Regis, Exmouth, Plymouth and the rest—to be on the look-out for his boat, but he's not put in anywhere yet."

"Nor will he, I don't expect," said Cammison: "he's got enough stores for a whole trip and a good big keg of water. I went on a cruise with him last year and he kept at sea the whole of the first four days on end. Hove-to at night and sailed all day. A storm'd be the only thing that'd drive him into port."

"Seems as if we'd better warn shipping to keep a look-out for him. Still, there's no immediate hurry about that, I reckon. The brewery can get on without him for a day or two longer. Seems a pity to spoil his holiday."

After which lamentably unofficial statement, the sergeant sucked his teeth and gazed abstractedly into his tankard. Herbert interpreted these signs correctly; the tankard was refilled.

"This is a lousy case," said Nigel. "No corpse—to speak of. Everyone's got a motive. No one seems to have an alibi except Barnes and Parsons—and their alibis are only supplied by their women, which means they're worth damn all to us. The whole thing is really most unorthodox. The textbooks aren't going to help us. We shall have to take to a planchette board or a divining-rod or something. What candidates is Tyler backing—or is the old fox keeping an open mind?"

"He fancies Mr. Sorn at present, I'd say, sir. The young gentleman stood to gain most by Mr. Bunnett's death. The inspector's asked the French police to get in touch with Mrs. Sorn, but there won't be anything in that quarter. The lady's never visited this town—that we *do* know, so she couldn't've known enough about the brewery to do what was done."

"You know," said Nigel, "I feel there's something we've missed. There's something sort of ringing in my head, connected vaguely with that party after the literary society meeting. Now what the devil is it?"

Nigel went over in his mind what had happened in this room two nights ago. Mrs. Bunnett had taken a firm line about having some sherry. Eustace had said, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a glass of water, my dear?" or words to that effect. The precise, crackling voice echoed in Nigel's head; but there was something missing; another sound ought to accompany it. Another sound——

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Keys! Bunnett jingled a bunch of keys that night. Where are they? Why did the murderer leave everything in Bunnett's pockets except the bunch of keys?"

"Oh, but we *did* find them, sir. I made a second search in the hop-back that night, Mr. Barnes having stated that the deceased always carried a bunch of keys—and there they was, sure enough. Easy enough to miss them the first time in that lucky dip: filtered it all the second time: found some more teeth too."

"Gone!" declaimed Nigel tragically; "all, all my little ones! That's the very last idea I had left. Now I shall resign."

Sergeant Tollworthy rose, not without difficulty. "Well, gentlemen, I must be getting along. Now don't you worry, doctor: we'll get the chap before long. And if that Feather starts talking any more, I'll knock his block off."

"A friend at court," Nigel said when the sergeant had gone.

"Yes. He's a good sort. I pulled his boy, Ned, out of a nasty attack of pneumonia last year, and old Tollworthy's been almost embarrassingly grateful ever since."

"It certainly is quite a nice change to find a bobby who doesn't suspect everybody on principle. That's one of the two bright spots in this stygian case."

"And the other?"

"Whoever slew Bunnett had his heart in the right place, so we needn't anticipate any more murders. The *fons et origo mali* has been—shall we say, choked off? So everyone should be quite happy."

"Let's hope you're right," said Cammison equably.

Chapter VIII

July 19, 8.20–11.30 a.m.

> *Surely the continual habit of dissimulation is but a weak and sluggish cunning, and not greatly politic.*
> BACON, *Advancement of Learning*

Sunday morning. Maiden Astbury hangs in a state of suspended animation. The Prior chimes have rung out cheerfully for the early service, and ceased ringing: the five-minutes' bell has played its game of cat-and-mouse with belated worshippers; sounding with quickening impatience, then falling ominously silent so that old ladies lifted their black-satin skirts and took to their heels, then striking up again in leisurely fashion—putting out its iron tongue, no doubt, at the panting old things; then repeating the process all over again. Now the mischievous five-minutes' bell is silent too, and the streets settle down to doze and enjoy the mild sunlight. Even the pieces of tinfoil and paper, with which a roaring charabanc party littered them yesterday evening, look peculiarly smug and lifeless. The only sound that breaks this Sabbath calm proceeds from the bathroom of Dr. Cammison's house, where Nigel is favouring the chromium-plated taps with a selection from his repertoire. Even the politest Wykehamist would have had some difficulty in expressing an admiration for Nigel's singing voice: his own friends compared it to the barking of a sea-lion, to the sound of one of the earliest tractors surmounting a particularly steep gradient of ploughed land, to the hoarse shouts of a brutal soldiery mopping up some devoted outpost, to a road-drill, to the croaking of ravens on a wild and rock-bound coast—according to their natural bent and powers of invention. On one thing everyone would agree, and that is the really shattering volume of sound which Nigel, when warmed up, can emit.

"I met with Napper Tandy,
And I took him by the hand,"

he roared, beating time with a defeated-looking loofah. Instead, however, of proceeding to inquire how poor old Ireland was and where did she stand, Nigel fell suddenly silent. "I met with Napper Tandy and I took him by the hand," he said to himself. "Now that's a point that might have struck me before. Did the murderer meet Bunnett at the brewery entrance and say, 'Fancy seeing you here at this time of night! Well, as you're here, just come into the office a minute, will you; I want to slit your throat with this decent little knife I have in my pocket.' Because, if he didn't, how could he be sure that Bunnett would ever be in a vulnerable position to be murdered? After all, Bunnett had gone there to catch out the watchman in his alleged pilfering: he would keep near Lock, wherever Lock went, so Lock would be a sort of unconscious bodyguard. Of course, the murderer could lie in wait for Bunnett somewhere *en route* between the brewery gates and—and where, though? Bunnett might decide to go straight to the storeroom, or the place where the bottled beer was kept, or Lock's cubby-hole. How could the murderer know which route Bunnett was going to take? Of course, he might lurk in the brewery yard and cut his victim off before he entered the actual premises. But the yard was overlooked by the row of houses opposite, and there would be just a chance of someone seeing him in the act. Apart from that, if he killed Bunnett in the yard, why go to all the trouble and danger of dragging him into the brewery and up the steps of the copper platform? Why not leave him weltering in his gore? Which, of course, brought one back to the original teaser—why was Bunnett put in the copper at all?

"Leaving that aside," thought Nigel, "perhaps my first idea is not so crazy as it sounded. It is quite conceivable that the murderer—call him X—should have met Bunnett at the brewery entrance. What excuse could he have for being there? Holed out in one!—say he had received an anonymous letter; produce it, in fact—he could easily have posted himself one at the same time that Bunnett's was posted. After that, it should be easy enough to manoeuvre Bunnett into some secluded corner where the blunt instrument or whatnot could be wielded with maximum impunity. But not, surely, the copper-room? There could be no possible excuse for dragging Bunnett up there when the two of them were supposed to be padding on the trail of the errant Lock. Bunnett *must* have been murdered somewhere else—in some room where X could plausibly take him in the process of catching out the night watchman. Where? Well, why not one of the offices—Bunnett's own room or Joe Bunnett's, or the clerk's office? None of these was visited by the night watchman, which would make it easier still. X might say—*par exemple*—'Look here, this chap

Lock may cut up nasty; there's a jolly little life-preserver (revolver, loaded stick) in so and so's office: let's go and fetch it first.' Or—but there were dozens of pretexts for getting Bunnett up there. There ought to have been some signs left, though, if any of the private rooms or offices was used. I must ask the office staff about that: or whoever cleans them out in the morning. I wonder if Joe Bunnett's room is locked up in his absence. That would have been a good place.

"And then there is another thing. If my theorising is correct, it eliminates Mrs. Bunnett, Miss Mellors and Herbert Cammison from the list of suspects: because none of them could conceivably have claimed that "Well-wisher" had sent them a letter telling them how to catch out the night watchman. Joe Bunnett might also be eliminated: he couldn't plausibly assert that he'd returned from his cruise on the strength of an anonymous letter. No, not plausibly to anyone but a semi-maniac like his brother. Eustace Bunnett, in his horrible zeal to catch out his employees anywhere and anyhow, might overlook a consideration like that. Joe cannot be absolutely eliminated. That leaves me with Gabriel Sorn, the head brewer, Ed Parsons, and—more doubtfully—Joe Bunnett as starters in the suspicion stakes." Nigel was aroused from his reverie by a banging on the door.

"Hoy!" a voice cried. "Have you had a syncope? Or are you carrying out experiments with boiling water? I want a bath."

"Sorry, Herbert. I was just thinking."

"Well, your thinking is less offensive than your singing, I'll admit, but equally inconvenient for your fellow men."

Nigel made some lurid observations on the verbiage of pedants, and prepared to get out. . . .

Two hours later he was entering the neat and unassuming residence of Mr. H. Barnes. He was shown into a parlour which, for sheer heat and luxuriance of fern-growth, fell little short of a tropical forest. The head brewer shortly appeared, in his shirt-sleeves. He greeted Nigel with one eyebrow lifted and the other depressed.

"Well, sir, and what brings you to my humble abode so early in the morning?" he asked jocularly.

"I wanted a word with your daughter, Lily. I'm supposed to be running the Truffles angle of this case, and I thought I'd make a beginning with the office staff."

Mr. Barnes scratched his bristly chin. "Well, I suppose that's all right," he said dubiously. "If you like wasting your time, it's none of my affair. Don't worry Lil, will you sir? She's not been herself lately. Don't know what's up with her: but tell her old dad about it—not she. Shouldn't wonder if it wasn't nothing but them daft film magazines she spends her money on," he added darkly.

"No, I'll not worry her. Just a few harmless questions I want to ask. But, look here, there are one or two things perhaps you could tell me first."

Nigel elicited the information that *(a)* Joe Bunnett's room was locked in his absence, but there was a master-key in the office which would open it; *(b)* the private rooms and offices had not been cleaned the morning of the murder, but the police had been through them since; *(c)* that Eustace Bunnett was no loss to the world, and the brewery would be a different place with Mr. Joe in command.

"Yes, put it on its legs again, he will," said Mr. Barnes.

"That reminds me. Didn't you say, that afternoon in your office when Mr. Sorn and I were there, that there were rumours about Bunnett selling the brewery?"

Mr. Barnes tapped the side of his nose. "Don't ask no questions, and you'll be told no lies."

"But surely it can't make any difference now. Eustace is dead, so presumably the thing'll fall through."

"Yes, there's something in that," said the head brewer, who clearly liked confidences to be extorted from him with due deliberation and ceremonial. "Mind you, Mr. Strangeways, I'm not saying it's gospel. It may have been a canard. Yes, a canard," he repeated with relish: "but it did come to my ears, through channels which I will not specify, that Roxby's—that big Midland firm—were in negotiation with Mr. Bunnett to buy him out."

"Why should he—I mean, it seems odd that Bunnett should have contemplated selling the business when he got so much kick out of bossing it."

"Put that way, it does. But that's only half the matter," said Mr. Barnes magisterially, "you see—mind you, I'm making no assertions—there's such a thing as selling out *and* there's such a thing as being sold up."

"You mean the brewery was bankrupt?"

The head brewer's eyebrows nearly shot off the top of his head with horror.

"Now, please, Mr. Strangeways," he protested, "really, you mustn't leap to conclusions like that. The truth of it is this. The guv'nor was hidebound; he didn't like newfangled ways and he didn't like spending money—and there's no use shutting our eyes to it. Consequentially, the brewery was having a hard time to compete with firms that've got better methods and newer equipment. Bunnett's wasn't bankrupt, but I doubt we'd not have stood the racket another ten years—or even five, may be."

"Have you any idea how long these negotiations had been going on?"

"With Roxby's? Couldn't say for certain. Quite recently, I should guess."

"Oh, well, we'll get in touch with Roxby's about that."

"That's all right. But don't forget"—Mr. Barnes did complicated things with his eyebrows—"I told you nothing."

"You——? Oh, of course. No, we'll call it 'information received.' Tell me one thing more. If Roxby's had taken over Bunnett's, would it have meant big changes in the staff?"

Mr. Barnes gave Nigel one of his unexpected shrewd glances. "I see what you're getting at." He was silent a moment. "No, you're barking up the wrong tree, Mr. Strangeways. I don't reckon the transfer would've affected our staff—they're good lads, worth their money, all of 'em. They'd not be turned off."

"And what about Joe Bunnett, yourself and Mr. Sorn?" said Nigel, meeting frankness with frankness.

"What? The key men in the place? Now you're joking, sir."

Mr. Barnes laughed heartily.

"Too heartily?" thought Nigel: "mightn't Roxby's have made a clean sweep? Of course, Joe has a share in the brewery; they couldn't do anything about that: but they could install a new manager in his place. And surely Sorn, a pupil brewer, couldn't be called a key man."

"Well, many thanks," said Nigel. "Can I have a word with your daughter now?"

"Righty-ho. I'll call her."

Mr. Barnes ambled to the door, his long arms swinging loosely.

"Hey, Lil!" he called up the stairs.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Gentleman wants to see you."

This announcement was received with an audible giggle, and "Tell Ed not to be so fresh! I'm all in my best Sunday undies. He'd better try!"

"It's not Ed. It's a gentleman—he's staying with Dr. Cammison. Look sharp and get dressed, my girl!"

There was a stifled shriek. Then silence. Mr. Barnes put his head in at the door of the parlour and said—with that air of deep significance which his lugubrious face contrived to impart to the most ordinary statements:

"Two's company, Mr. Strangeways. I'll get along. Lil will be down in a minute."

Whatever Nigel was expecting—and certainly, after the exchanges he had just heard, he expected the worst—he could not have anticipated the apparition that entered the room five minutes later. Lily Barnes inherited her long face, long arms and lanky body from her father; on this groundwork she had built up a remarkably accurate representation of Greta Garbo. Her coiffure evidently dated from "Christina of Sweden," a sort of tawny mane flopping along her shoulders: she had powdered her face till it was stark-white as any film close-up of the great original: she had used no make-up, except for the subdued red on her long, drooping mouth. Lily Barnes wore an old raincoat—and nothing between it and the "best Sunday undies," Nigel suspected. She slouched into the room, her hands in the pockets of the raincoat, leaning her back against the door and mooed huskily at Nigel.

"You want to see me?"

Nigel, with superhuman efforts, restrained himself from replying, "No, I tank I go 'oame," and said:

"Er—yes, just for a few minutes. I want—I say, won't you sit down?"

"I like to stand."

"Oh—er—well, you please yourself." He pulled himself together. Shock tactics might be best for this Garbo. "I want to talk to you about Mr. Bunnett's dog, Truffles."

One of Lil's hands came out and began stroking the woodwork of the door. That was foolish of her, thought Nigel, noticing how the hand shook. She kept up her end, however.

"Truffles? Yes. Poor little dog," she mooed wearily.

"Now, I have good reason to believe that, when Truffles—er—met his end, everyone in the brewery was satisfactorily accounted for except the office staff," said Nigel briskly. "I have also reason to believe that the killing of the dog may be connected with the killing of Mr. Bunnett."

"So what?" asked Lily sharply, with a temporary lapse into Jean Harlow.

"So, as I'm sitting in on this case, I thought I'd come to one of the office staff and see what she had to say about it."

"Oh, a detective, yes? You accuse me of killing the poor little dog?"

Nigel changed direction with fluency and astuteness. He gazed at Lily admiringly, as though he had not noticed her properly before.

"You know," he said, "when you came into the room, I couldn't think for a moment who you reminded me of. Really, it's an extraordinary resemblance. I should say you had a real film personality: and it's personality that does count on the screen nowadays."

Miss Barnes swallowed the bait voraciously. She beamed in a most un-Garboesque manner and said:

"That's what I'm always telling Ed."

"Ed?"

"Ed Parsons—he's my bo—one of my admirers, I mean," Lily amended hastily.

"Well, whaddya-know-about-that?" exclaimed Nigel, desperately ransacking his memory for film vocabulary. "Ed Parsons? Well, isn't that just too bad now?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lily sharply.

"Well, I'll say that boy is in one tough spot just now with the bulls."

"Oh, come off it!" said Lily, dropping Greta Garbo with a thump onto the floor. "Talk English! My Ed's not done anything, and if anyone says——"

"Half a minute," interrupted Nigel gratefully, resuming his own personality. "Let's get the Truffles business straight first. Either his death is connected with Bunnett's or not."

"Go on!" Lily said derisively.

"I will. If it was connected, it implies that the murderer wished to make an experiment in the sarcophagous qualities——"

"The *what* qualities?"

"Sorry, the flesh-devouring qualities of the pressure copper. In other words, whoever killed Truffles killed Bunnett too. So naturally a certain amount of suspicion falls on the office staff."

The dawning consternation in Lily's eyes did not escape Nigel. But he continued glibly, looking down his nose now, "Of course, the whole thing may have been a practical joke that went wrong—or explainable in some innocent way; in fact it would be very much more comfortable for everyone concerned if it was. But I'm afraid——"

Lily Barnes was beside him, clutching his shoulders. "Look here, if I tell you, will you promise not to spill it to Mr. Joe or Dad. They'd be ever so angry, and it was all an accident, I swear it was."

Nigel's sighting shot had hit the bull. He tried to look as omniscient as Lily evidently believed him to be, sat the girl down in a chair and made her tell her story. Briefly, it was this. Eustace Bunnett had been raising hell in the office the day before. Lily and the two clerks, rabid with indignation, had planned to kidnap Truffles. This was partly to spite its owner and partly because they were genuinely sorry for the animal—

Truffles had not escaped his master's ill-temper that morning; they had heard Bunnett thrashing him in his room. The plan was that when Bunnett went out for his morning tour of inspection the next day, Lily should take the dog, hide him under her coat, walk into the brewery yard with him and hand him over to her friend, Gertie Tollworthy, who would be waiting just outside the yard gates with a hamper. Gertie would take a bus and hand over the dog to some friends of hers who lived in a small village twenty miles away. There he would be kept till a permanent home was found for him. All had gone swimmingly, up to a point. But just as Lily was about to walk out of the premises, she heard Bunnett talking to the clerk in the entrance office. So, unfortunately, did Truffles. He began to yelp under her coat. Lily lost her head and rushed through the door and up the ladder into the copper-room. Luckily there was no one there at the moment. Lily stood behind the wall of the open copper, ready to duck down if Bunnett should come that way. Truffles was now thoroughly restive. He had heard his master's voice; and, with that perverse and horrible instinct that drives a dog to come cowering up to the hand that will beat him (his instinct told him he was doing wrong not to be sitting tamely in his basket in Bunnett's room), Truffles squirmed and wriggled, and before Lily could get a proper grip on him, he had squirmed out of her arms and fallen straight into the open copper.

That was that. Lily knew he would be dead in a second after dropping into that seething brew. She hurried back to the office and told her fellow conspirators what had happened. When Bunnett made his inquiries into the dog's disappearance, both the clerks swore black and blue that Lily had been in the office all the time that he was out of his room; and, if any of the other employees had seen her elsewhere on the premises, they liked her too much to rush off to Bunnett with the information.

This tale was at the same time so odd and so circumstantial that Nigel had no difficulty in believing it, apart from it's teller's obvious sincerity. But there was one point.

"I'm sure that is the truth," he said: "don't get the idea that I'm doubting it, because I'm not. But from all I've heard of the late E. Bunnett, I'm rather surprised he didn't bully the truth out of you himself."

Lily blushed and twisted her fingers round one of the raincoat buttons.

"He didn't try very hard. You see—well, it does seem silly, him being as old as the hills and past that sort of thing, you'd think—but he was a bit sweet on me and I suppose that's why."

This was going to be a ticklish operation, thought Nigel. Well, he might as well have a go at it.

"I suppose Ed was pretty jealous—if he knew that, I mean."

Lily's face grew hard and sullen. "Here," she said, "are you trying to put anything on Ed, because, if you are, I'll thank you to keep your nose out of it."

"It's not what *I* am trying to put on him. It's the police—and their noses are a sight sharper than mine."

The girl's long mouth began to quiver. She burst out:

"But Ed wouldn't—anyhow, he didn't know—and I was with him that night, out in Honeycombe Wood, we were, we went out there on his motor-bike after the dance—we didn't get back till half-past twelve—so he couldn't have done the murder, that proves it, doesn't it?"

Nigel claimed no infallibility as a lie-detector. Indeed, he might easily have accepted all this if he hadn't just before heard Lily telling what was almost certainly the truth about Truffles. There was such an obvious divergence between her ways of telling the two different stories. Ed's alibi came too readily, too mechanically to her tongue in spite of the emotional strain which made the actual wording of it a little incoherent: and she gave the impression—an impression that all unpractised liars give—of listening to her own words and listening for their effect on the audience.

Nigel said, in his gentle but detached voice, not looking at Lily:

"You know, I've been mixed up in several crimes, and there's one thing I've always noticed. It does pay to tell the truth. I remember a case not long ago when several witnesses—from the best and most unselfish motives—withheld certain bits of information and distorted others. It was an awful mistake on their part. They wanted to shield someone; and, of course, we soon tumbled to who that someone was, and it merely had the effect of making us suspect him far more seriously than we should have done if his friends had told the truth all along. That's all rather complicated: but you see what I mean? If you really believe someone is innocent, then much the best thing is to tell the truth about him. To tell the truth is really a test of how strong your belief is. If *you,* for instance, love Ed Parsons enough to believe absolutely in his innocence, then——"

Nigel was interrupted by a subdued sob from the girl. She mastered herself and said:

"You really mean that? Honest? You're not trying to trap me into——?"

"I don't look like a grizzled trapper, do I?"

"I'll trust you, then. I've been ever so miserable, wondering if I oughtn't to. You see, Mr. Strangeways, it was like this——"

Then Lily Barnes began to tell her tale—a different tale. She and Ed had left the dance at 11.30, as she had originally said, and gone up to Honeycombe Wood. There a quarrel had flared up. Ed had started throwing his weight about on the subject of Eustace Bunnett. Lily had replied spiritedly that she was not married to Ed yet, and if he didn't like her gentlemen friends, he knew what he could do about it. Ed replied darkly that he did know, and Bunnett'd better watch his step and so had Lily—if it wasn't too late already. Just what exactly did he mean by that? Well, he said, it wouldn't've been the first time that a girl had been got into trouble by her employer. Lily had been furious at this totally false (she assured Nigel) insinuation: so furious, indeed, that she hadn't even bothered to deny its truth. If Ed believed she was that sort, he was welcome to and she wouldn't take him back, not if he went down on his knees to her. Nigel asked how the young man could have got such an idea into his head, and Lily replied that that dirty little cat, Gertie Tollworthy, who apparently nourished a hopeless passion for Ed, must have been telling stories. Remembering the sergeant's statement, Nigel could verify this. But, he said, he thought Lily and Gertie were bosom friends. Lily made some forceful comments on the subject of vipers in bosoms, and told him that she had quarrelled with Gertie soon after the Truffles episode and not been on speaking terms since. Nigel led her tactfully back to the dust-up with Ed. After raving for a bit, Ed had asked her point-blank whether she was with child by Bunnett. Lily had said if he liked to believe that, then she was not going to stop him; and added some excusable but ill-advised remarks on the comparative potentiality of Ed and Mr. Bunnett for fatherhood. That, as she said, tore it properly. Ed had taken her refusal to deny his accusation as a confession of guilt, jumped on his motor-bike and ridden off at breakneck speed, leaving Lily to walk back by herself into Maiden Astbury. The evening after, Ed had come round in a fair panic. Eustace Bunnett had been murdered and the police would be bound to suspect him of the murder. Lily herself was terrified that he might have done it, though he swore that, after leaving her the night before, he'd ridden about the country lanes half-trying to break his neck and not gone near the brewery. So she had made it up with him and agreed to say that she had been with him all the time that night.

"What time did Ed leave you, actually?" asked Nigel.

"I heard the Priory clock strike midnight just before he went off. You don't think he——?"

"No, I don't. And it just shows you how very much more satisfactory it'd have been if you'd told the truth at the beginning. You see, it's not likely that Ed would've made plans to kill Bunnett until he had heard from your own mouth that the old satyr had done you wrong. But the anonymous letter that got Bunnett into the brewery was written on the 15th, the day before your quarrel. Mind you, that doesn't clear Ed absolutely; but it will make things look a good deal better for him."

Lily smiled at Nigel. She had recovered her spirits and a certain measure of her Garbo personality as well.

"You know, you're a nice boy. A very nice boy, you are, really," she said.

"Yes," said Nigel, backing hastily towards the door, "so my wife tells me. I'll be seeing you."

Chapter IX

July 19, 11.30 a.m.–1.20 p.m.

I'll example you with thievery.
SHAKESPEARE, *Timon of Athens*

Frost and fraud have dirty ends.
WILLIAM GURNALL,
Christian in Complete Armour

On his way to the police station, Nigel called in at Ed Parsons' lodgings. Ed was a tall young man, with a mop of stubborn red hair and a rather delicate, pallid complexion. He was inclined to be truculent at first; but, on hearing that Lily had told Nigel the real story, he calmed down and admitted its truth. He had left Lily in a towering rage and ridden madly around the deserted lanes for nearly half an hour before returning home. He was ashamed now of ever having suspected her of relations with Bunnett; but he'd been ragged about it a bit at the brewery, and when Gertie Tollworthy told him Lily was going to have a baby and Lily led him on to thinking it must be true, what could you expect?

"When did Gertie tell you that?" Nigel asked.

"Oh—let me see now, it was during the dance—on Thursday night, that was."

"Good. If she corroborates that, you're out," thought Nigel to himself. "The letter was posted on Wednesday afternoon. Unless, of course, there's a conspiracy between Ed and Gertie, and that doesn't seem likely. Anyway, if Gertie had told Ed her story *before* Thursday night he would have already determined to kill Bunnett and written the anonymous letter—in which case it would obviously not be safe to let Lily know that he believed her guilty."

However, to make sure certain, Nigel obtained the Tollworthy's address from Parsons, found Gertie in, and soon reduced her to a proper state of tears and repentance. Yes, she agreed that she had come to Ed with that tale about Lily and Mr. Bunnett on Thursday night: she couldn't help it; seeing Ed dancing with Lil made her feel so jealous of a sudden, it all slipped out: and of course, Mr. Bunnett *had* been carrying on a bit with Lil—at least, that's what people in the brewery were saying; so really it was only right for someone to warn Ed.

Nigel cut short this casuistry, and walked the thirty yards farther to the police station. There he found Sergeant Tollworthy, positively bursting his buttons with suppressed excitement.

"Mr. Bunnett's house burgled last night," he said.

"Eustace Bunnett's?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was taken?"

"That we don't rightly know yet. No silver or nothing like that. The chap seems to have been after higher game."

"Coo! You interest me strangely, Watson. Not private papers, by any chance?"

The sergeant leant back, put his head on one side, and gazed at Nigel admiringly.

"I told that Tyler only this morning that you'd got a head on your shoulders," he said. "It never does to judge by appearances, does it, sir?" he added enthusiastically.

"No, I suppose it doesn't," replied Nigel, with less enthusiasm.

"Papers—that's what it was, sir. Properly rifled, Mr. Bunnett's study was. Drawers opened—everything all over the shop. Inspector's going through them now with Mrs. Bunnett, though I don't reckon she knows much about her husband's private affairs."

"Did he break in—the burglar, I mean."

"No, sir, just walked, seemingly. You was right about them keys, after all, sir."

"Right about the keys?" said Nigel, mystified.

"Ar. It's like this. When, in the course of our investigations upon the scene of the crime, we found no traces of breaking and entering," the sergeant declaimed sonorously, "we deduced that the burglar must have been in possession of keys. The front door was bolted as well as locked at night, of course: but there's a side door with a Yale lock, unbolted, and it was through the same that the criminal must have effected his entry. Similarly, the drawers of Mr. Bunnett's buroo had not been forced, which pointed to the presence of a desk-key in the possession of the miscreant."

"Quite so," said Nigel, his head reeling a little from the solid impact of this jargon. "But how did the keys come into the possession of the—er—miscreant?"

"Ah," said the sergeant rather gratuitously, "now you've laid your finger on the vital spot. Tyler had an idea—a bit overdue, I reckon, but he does his best with the brains God gave him. He showed Mr. Bunnett's key-ring, what was found in the hop-back, to Mrs. Bunnett, thinking as how the murderer might have slipped a couple of 'em off before he pushed the deceased into the copper. 'Nothing doin',' says the lady: 'all present and correct.' Tyler was looking fair disheartened, when Mrs. Bunnett pipes up, 'But what about the duplicates? Where are they? So it transpires as Mr. Bunnett used to keep duplicates of his door keys, and the keys of the desks in his home and in the brewery, in his waistcoat pocket; so as, if he lost one set, he'd still have another—if you take my meaning."

"In fact, it's dollars to doughnuts that the bloke who was making merry with Bunnett's papers last night was the bloke who murdered Bunnett."

"That's right, sir. But there ain't no fingerprints, none that haven't a business to be there. So I can't see as it helps us much."

"Oh, come now, I don't agree with that. However, did Mrs. Bunnett take the point? I mean, how did she react to the idea of having had a midnight visit from the murderer?"

"Oh, she's a regular caution, the old girl is. Murderer in the house? Husband's study burgled? Did that worry her? Not a bit of it! Kept nagging at Tyler to arrest Alice—that's her servant—for eating a cake and a couple of loaves she'd baked the day before. In a fair taking over it, the old girl was. Tyler had to dry her up pretty sharp in the end."

At this point the inspector came in, carrying a file and a sheaf of papers under his arm. He nodded curtly to Nigel and sat down at his table.

"Find anything missing, sir?" asked Tollworthy.

"All in good time, me lad," said Tyler, spreading the papers out in front of him and perusing them. Then he added, over his shoulder, "Can't tell what was missing because we don't know what was there originally."

The sergeant subsided. After a minute or two, Tyler pushed the papers away impatiently.

"Nothing there that I can see. That leaves us with this file. New file marked 'Roxby's,' Mr. Strangeways, found it empty, and no papers in Mr. Bunnett's study connected with it. Roxby's? Now where the devil have I heard that name?"

"The night watchman was in their employment before he came to Bunnett's," said Nigel demurely.

The inspector frowned. "Yes, of course. Had it on the tip of my tongue. I always thought there might be something fishy about that man Lock."

"Not fish, beer," said Nigel, succumbing, as usual, to his weakness for exhibitionism. "Roxby's is a big brewery firm in the Midlands. The missing papers contain preliminary negotiations between Roxby's and Mr. Bunnett for the sale of Bunnett's controlling interest in the brewery to Roxby's."

Nigel looked down his nose and waited for the storm to break. The sergeant's eyes appeared to be coming out on stalks. Tyler was sitting quite rigid, his big white face motionless as a frozen moon: then he burst out:

"Look here, sir. Have you been withholding this information?"

"No, no! Certainly not. Never withhold information—at least, scarcely ever. Most irregular. Very bad form. I only heard the—er—details this morning."

Nigel proceeded to recount his interview with the head brewer. Tyler told the sergeant to get a trunkcall through to someone in authority at Roxby's.

"Pity Barnes didn't tell me all this before. Obstructive that man's been all along. Still, it pretty well lets him out, I suppose."

"Lets him out? Why?"

"Well, sir," explained the inspector, his small eyes narrowed superciliously, "that's surely quite obvious. If Barnes had gone to all that trouble last night to destroy the evidence of this forthcoming deal with Roxby's, he'd not be likely to tell you all about the deal this morning."

"I don't know about that. It would be an excellent way of diverting suspicion from himself."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Strangeways. That's much too subtle for me. People don't behave like that, outside of books."

"Well, then, why didn't the thief take the file away? And why did he leave the room in such disorder?"

"Lost his head, I expect. The servant, Alice, says she got up and went out of her bedroom about one o'clock in the morning. No doubt the thief heard her moving about and did a bunk."

"That's very theoretical. If it was of such vital importance to him to keep the Roxby's affair quiet by stealing the papers, why on earth didn't he take the file too?"

"I suppose he didn't see the name. 'Roxby's' written on it. It's on the underside of the cover-flap where he could easily miss it."

"Well, I still think the whole thing suggests the murderer's deliberately drawing our attention to the Roxby's transactions; which would imply that his real motive for the murder was quite a different one."

The inspector laughed. "With your imagination, sir, you ought to write a book."

"I have," replied Nigel sourly. "I have also eliminated another of your suspects."

"Is that so, sir?" said Tyler in a humouring voice.

"Is it so. Ed Parsons."

Nigel gave the gist of his interviews with Lily, Ed, and Gertie Tollworthy.

"Humph! So them two were telling us lies all the time, were they? They'll hear some more from me about that."

"No doubt. But in the meantime we've got this little affair of a murder on our hands. I——"

Nigel was interrupted by the tinkle of the desk telephone. The inspector took off the receiver.

"Hallo! This is Inspector Tyler, speaking from Maiden Astbury, Dorset. . . . A round of golf? Yes, sir, it must have been inconvenient for you: but I happen to be investigating a murder. . . . Yes, Mr. Eustace Bunnett. . . . Yes, sir, very sad. . . . Now I just want to know the details of the negotiations between him and your people for the sale of Bunnett's. . . . Yes, sir, of course it shall remain confidential. . . ."

The metallic gabble from the other end proceeded. At one point the inspector's eyes grew round and he whistled under his breath. "Closing the place down, you say? . . . Yes, of course. . . . And was there anyone else, at your end or over here, who'd be likely to know of these negotiations? . . . I see. Thank you very much, sir. I think that will be all for the present."

Tyler turned to Nigel with a triumphant look.

"I wonder how your Mr. Barnes is going to explain that."

"You speak in riddles. Elucidate, I pray you."

"Roxby's were planning to extend their trade down this way. They're building a new works near Bath, and they proposed to buy up Bunnett's and close it down, so as to remove the competition. Said it'd pay them better than to modernise the place. And there was that Barnes stuffing you up with stories about how no one at the brewery'd be affected by the change! Played you up for a sucker properly, didn't he?"

"Well, he who sucks last sucks worst. We shall see. And are you rushing round to Mr. Barnes with a nice bright pair of handcuffs on the strength of that?"

"You bet I'm not. Plenty o' routine work to be done before that. But you amateurs aren't interested in that, are you? Too much like hard work, eh?" the inspector said, with the heavy jocularity of a giant squid that has digested a hundredweight of fresh fish and it now telling a baby cuttle where it gets off. "I'm not saying that Barnes is our man. But I reckon I've narrowed it down to him, Mr. Joe Bunnett and that Mr. Sorn. They're the only ones who'd be interested in those negotiations with Roxby's not going through—and the only ones likely to know about them, too."

"Well, I'm still inclined to think that this Roxby's business is a smoke-cloud put up by the murderer. Still, supposing you're right: what about Joe Bunnett? He'd be the one most likely to know the details of the negotiations. Closing down the brewery would be a bad show for him financially; whereas Bunnett's death gives him absolute control over it; and he does seem to have been really interested in the place—as a human being, I mean—the idea of all those chaps being turned off——"

"Ah, very likely. But where is he? He's so well known in this town and the villages around, because of his travelling round the pubs owned by the firm. Somebody'd be bound to have seen and recognised him by now. If it was him that entered Bunnett's study last night, he can't be very far away; he hasn't been seen at the railway station here, and his car is in garage down in Poolhampton. But it'd be madness for him to stay anywhere near the town if he did the murder and this cruise of his was intended for an alibi."

"No news about *The Gannet* yet?"

"No. Funny, that. Shipping's been warned, as well as the coastguards and harbour authorities. Fairly easy for a man to disappear, but how you make a decent-size cabin-cruiser vanish, I just don't know."

"Some bird got a magic wand, I expect. Or alternatively, it might have sunk."

"In this weather?"

"Yes, it's a brute, isn't it? I suppose Joe Bunnet hasn't been buying a motor-cycle lately?"

The inspector's moon-white face assumed a positively Machiavellian expression.

"Aha!" he said. "I wondered would you think of that. I'm making inquiries. Still an' all, he's not the only pebble on the beach. This young Mr. Sorn now—very suspicious his behaviour's been. Said he was out for a walk that night, but——"

"Somehow I doubt if we'd have got him to admit that so easily if he had done the murder. I dunno, though."

"And look at his motive. Fifty thousand quid to share with his mother—she's O.K., by the way: heard from the French police. She was sitting quiet in her villa over there when this happened."

"You're not committing yourself to the Roxby's motive, then?"

"Not altogether. It doesn't do to be bigoted, sir. Keep an open mind and study the facts is what I say."

The sergeant entered and informed Tyler that there was a man wanting to see him outside. The inspector went out. Nigel lit a cigarette, laid the cigarette-card on his thumb and flicked it neatly into the waste-paper basket at the other side of the room.

"Aha," he said to himself, "the old hand has not lost its cunning: which is more than can be said for the old brain, it seems. I just don't begin to have an idea who killed Bunnett. Gabriel Sorn, now. He seemed so obviously the villain of the piece that maybe I didn't think about him hard enough. He had opportunity and motive for the murder. On the other hand, he seems to have an alibi for the posting of the anonymous letter. Still, he could have got someone else to post it. Must find out if he knows anyone in Weston Priors. Motive, though. Somehow I can't quite see that young man killing anyone for money: he's not the calculating, cold-blooded type; and he did seem to be telling the truth when he said he knew nothing about Bunnett's will. What he really seemed upset about at the interview was that his mother should have had relations with Bunnett. Yes: the idea of that and of Bunnett being his father, might well push a neurotic sort of chap like him over the border-line. And Bunnett had been wounding him in another vital spot too: he'd been making him write doggerel advertisements for Bunnett's beers; remember how worked up he was about it on the night of the party. He'd resent that humiliation more than anything else almost. H'm. Gabriel Sorn. Yes. And the way, as I believe, the murderer's been drawing our attention to this Roxby's business; that points to Sorn too: he would be diverting our attention from himself and his own motives, because he actually stood to lose least by Bunnett's being closed down. Yes. Gabriel Sorn will bear looking into. I wonder was he taking another of his nocturnal outings last night."

At this point the inspector entered with a puzzled look on his face.

"Chap called Carruthers outside." he said. "Just like someone to turn up with fresh complications when I thought I was beginning to get things straight."

"These things are sent to try us," said Nigel.

"Dunno what to make of it. This chap looks after the refrigerating-room in the brewery, he says. Apparently, on the morning after the crime, Friday morning—that is, he found some emergency bell connected with this room out of order."

"The devil he did! This is great news. Now we're getting somewhere at last. Why on earth didn't he say something about it before?"

"Afraid of getting into hot water. It was his business to look after the refrigerators, you see. So he put the bell right and said nothing. Now, as you know, on Friday night we made a thorough search of the premises looking for anything that'd give us a line on the exact spot where the crime was committed. We found nothing. So next morning we typed out an appeal, which Mr. Barnes posted up in various parts of the brewery, asking anyone who had noticed anything unusual or amiss the day before to come forward. So this Carruthers sleeps on it and to-day he decides it's his duty to bring the information. I don't see, though, as——"

But Nigel was already out of the room and beginning to question Carruthers.

"The bell was out of order. You mean it had been disconnected, switched off—whatever the word is, or deliberately damaged?"

Carruthers began to be exceedingly technical.

"Hoy! Stop!" said Nigel. "I was suckled on irregular verbs, not high-frequency coils. Tell me in words of one syllable. Uncle Percy's first lessons in electricity to the tots."

Carruthers grinned and did his best. Nigel gathered that the bell had been put out of order, in such a way that it might well seem the result of an accidental breakdown: Carruthers, however, knew that this type of bell was most reliable, and was strongly of the opinion that it must have been tampered with.

"Come along!" Nigel exclaimed. "We must visit the scene of the crime. This is big stuff. Noted amateur bloodhound follows up the Clue of the Sabotaged Bell."

He led the way to the brewery, Tyler and Carruthers vainly attempting to match his long, loping strides. Soon they were standing outside the solid door of the refrigerating-room. Carruthers gave a short lecture-demonstration.

"And this bell was in working order on Thursday?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Tested it on Thursday afternoon myself."

"Let us explore, then," said Nigel.

"You're wasting time, sir," said the inspector. "We've been over that room already."

"Never mind."

The heavy door was swung open and they entered. They searched for a quarter of an hour. The refrigerating-room was cold, clean, blanched and empty as a winter sky.

"There you are, sir," said the inspector.

"Yes. There—it seems—I am." Nigel was standing near the door, his back to one of the refrigerators. "Doesn't seem so cold as when I was here last."

"No, sir," said Carruthers. "We're defrosting now."

Nigel stiffened. Then his mouth fell open and his face took on the blank, staring expression of one who has been shot and is just on the point of toppling over.

"Defrosting!" he yelled. "God, what a fool I am! Good old Jack Frost! Where's that blasted coat got to, I wonder?"

He took to his heels and ran like a mad dog out of the room. The inspector, pounding after him, arrived a very bad second at the head brewer's signal-box of an office. Nigel was already rummaging in the pockets of several long white coats that hung on the wall. Now he held out his hand to Tyler. On the palm lay a fragment of some dark green substance, about the size of a third of his little fingernail.

"There you are," he said breathlessly: "the missing clue. Feast your eyes on it, old boy. Now we're off."

He hurried back to the refrigerating-room, the inspector rumbling ominously at his side. When they had returned, Tyler burst out, "Now, then, sir. What *is* all this about? What's the idea concealing evidence like——?"

"Concealing my backside! I only just remembered it. When I was being shown over this room on Friday morning, I picked up that little slip of stuff—without thinking—you know—and put it in the pocket of the white coat I was wearing. Carruthers mentioning defrosting touched the spring in my memory. You see, this object was lying on a pocket of frost at the bottom of that groove there."

"Well, but——"

"Don't you see? Lying *on* a pocket of frost. It caught my eye. That means it must have dropped there quite recently, otherwise the frosting would have covered it. When did you defrost last—before the night of the murder, I mean, Carruthers?"

"Temperature was raised on Wednesday evening, lowered again on Thursday morning."

"So frost would be forming all Thursday?"

"That's right, sir."

"Q.E.D.," said Nigel triumphantly. "If this little object had been dropped there *before* Thursday night, by Friday morning it would have been covered over with frost. But it was *not* covered with frost. Ergo, it was dropped some time *during* Thursday night or Friday morning."

"But that don't lead anywhere necessarily. One of the employees might have dropped it there on Friday before you came in."

"Just have a look at it, will you? It's a fragment chipped off something. Off what?"

Inspector Tyler scrutinised it closely. There were fine lines, part of some pattern, indented on the solid dark-green surface. The inspector breathed heavily over it for a minute.

"I've got it!" he said; "it's a fragment off the seal of a signet-ring. But——"

"Exactly. And it could only have been splintered off by violence: its owner taking a swipe at that refrigerator, for instance, and cracking it hard with his fist, so that the seal is chipped and that fragment falls on to the pocket of frost underneath."

"But, damn it, sir, people don't go about taking swipes at refrigerators."

"No. Certainly not. Deuced bad taste, knocking refrigerators about. That's just the point. But a bloke might easily take a swipe at another bloke, *in a struggle, in the dark,* miss him, and crack his fist up against the fridge, by mistake."

"M'm. Something in that. I'd better take charge of that bit of seal. Shouldn't be difficult to find out who owns a seal ring, though I expect he'll have got rid of it when he found it was splintered. It's not a piece of Mr. Eustace Bunnett's, anyway: his was intact."

"I should say the College of Heralds might be able to reconstruct the whole crest from that bit there, and once you knew the crest you'd be as near as nothing to the murderer."

"We'll take a look at it under the microscope first, sir." The inspector was peering closely at the side of the refrigerator. "Ah, here's a little chip here, straight above where you found that bit of seal, looks as if it'd been freshly made. H'm. Four foot six from the ground. That's about the height you'd strike it with a fist if you were aiming at the jaw of a chap Bunnett's height."

Nigel was staring abstractedly at his feet. "I wonder why it was that the murderer's plans went wrong," he said.

Chapter X

July 19,1.30–5.30 p.m.

The lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine.
TEMPERANCE BALLAD *(nineteenth century)*

Nigel was still somewhat abstracted when he returned to the police station after lunch. This might have been ascribed to the two helpings of roast beef, three helpings of plum-tart, and plateful of cheese and biscuits which the Cammisons had, with growing apprehension, watched him eat.

"You know," Herbert said, "you'll do yourself an injury if you persist in eating like this. I had a case not long ago——"

"I don't mind about that," said Sophie. "It's my larder I'm worrying about. We shall have to build an annexe on to it before Nigel's next visit."

"Mphm. Jolly good cheese this. Could I have some more?"

"It'd be interesting to test your blood-pressure at this stage."

"I'm sure there'll be nothing left for supper," said Sophie.

"Oh, I say. Won't there really? Look here, let me take you both out to the hotel then," said Nigel, genuinely moved.

Sophie laughed. "No, it's all right. We'll scrape something together. You *are* funny, you know. But nice."

"Thank you."

"Are you stoking up for something definite, or just on general principles?" Dr. Cammison asked.

"Well, both. Men of genius have commonly been notoriously large eaters. Also, I'm going to interview Miss Mellors. What do *you* think of her?" he shot point-blank at Sophie.

"Me? Oh, I don't know about people." Sophie looked solemn and a little harassed behind her horn-rim spectacles, like an owl mobbed by tits. "She's quite nice really, though she *is* bossy. I think she's probably a sentimental old thing and ashamed of it, and that's why she puts on that sort of sergeant-major manner. I shouldn't be surprised if she had a secret sorrow."

"Darling, and you talk about *her* being sentimental!" said Herbert.

"Well, I do then. She's very kind-hearted, and it's always those gruff, kindly souls who have secret sorrows—in books, anyway."

"Oh, books!"

"Books are all right," said Nigel; "if you don't let them get a hold over you. Would you say, now, that Joe Bunnett was Miss Mellors' secret sorrow, by any chance?"

Sophie burst out laughing. "Joe! Oh dear!" Then, in a soberer voice, "Joe Bunnett? Well it might be, 's matter of fact. She does look at him in rather a doggish sort of way sometimes—faithful, I mean, not playful. And she does mother him a bit too; like going round and seeing his house is clean and warm just before he comes back from his holidays. They live nearly next door to each other, you know."

"Do they now?"

"Look here, young Nigel," said Cammison, "just what are you up to?"

"I don't quite know. Really I don't. Waiting for the dawn. Does Joe Bunnett wear a signet-ring?"

"No. Never seen him, at least. Have you, Sophie?"

"No."

Herbert Cammison regarded Nigel impassively. He said:

"Are you suspecting Joe of killing his brother, by any chance?"

"Things don't look too good for him."

Sophie gave a little gasp. "Nigel! you can't—Joe isn't—you wouldn't think that if you knew him."

"But he's on a cruise. How could he possibly——"

"Unfortunately, Herbert, he doesn't seem to be on this cruise. His boat has disappeared, anyway."

"But whatever reason would he have?"

"You must keep this under your hat for the present, you two: the brewery was in danger of being closed down." Nigel told them about Eustace's negotiations with Roxby's. "So there it is. With his brother alive, Joe would have seen Bunnett's closed down and all those chaps you admit he was fond of and popular with thrown out of work. With Eustace dead, Joe would inherit the controlling interest, and be able to break off negotiations with Roxby's, and modernise the brewery in the way you and he wanted to."

"Yes, there's a lot in that, I suppose," said Cammison. "But honestly, though Joe is a very good chap and all that, I can't somehow see him committing murder for such an altruistic motive. He's too fond of comfort and *bonhomie* to be one of those it-is-meet-that-one-man-die-for-the-people fanatics."

"Agreed. But supposing he had a strong personal motive for getting rid of his brother? You say Eustace always had Joe under his thumb—and obviously Eustace's thumb was a pretty galling one to be under. Well, when the Roxby's affair happens along, that provides Joe with a rationalisation of his own personal motive and a justification for acting on it."

"Possibly. Joe was certainly thwarted and repressed by his brother all along the line. The Roxby's affair might have turned on the extra bit of heat that made him boil over. But, mind you, Eustace didn't have it all his own way. Joe hadn't the guts to stand up to him openly, I admit: but he got a good deal past him in more devious ways. Eustace could be managed up to a point, if you took the line of least resistance with him: kow-tow to him a bit, give him the feeling that you thought him the Lord's anointed, never oppose him openly—and while he was lapping up that kind of flattery, the mice could play: up to a point, as I say. Joe knew that all right."

Sophie looked bewildered and indignant. "Herbert, how can you? It's different for Nigel: he doesn't know Joe like we do. But talking about him as though he was one of your patients' insides or something—it's so heartless. Why, think of all the times he's sat where Nigel is sitting now, enjoying himself; and those comic little men he makes out of fruit and matchsticks, and pretending his teeth had fallen into the soup. It's——"

"Diagnosis must precede a cure," said Herbert rather stiffly. "We're not going to help Joe by pretending he's someone quite different from what he really is." . . .

When Nigel got to the police station he found the inspector engrossed over a microscope.

"Here, sir, take a look. What do you make of this?"

The fragment of seal from the ring was lying on the slide. Nigel looked long and hard.

"Seems like an animal's bim, with tail attached. What are those vertical lines on either side? A tropical rainstorm?"

"Might be the stems of flowers, or corn, or something."

"M'm. Gryphon couchant on field of blé. Or perhaps it's a dog. Too many dogs in this case. Well, that ought to be some help. By the way, the Cammisons say they've never seen Joe Bunnett wearing a signet-ring."

"They're friends of his, though."

"Well?"

"It's obvious."

"H'm. 'Foxey—our revered father, gentlemen.' "

"What's that?"

"Nothing. A Fragrant Moment from Charles Dickens. Have you bent your mind to the great problem that I proposed you?"

"Meaning?"

"Why did our murderer alter his plans? Obviously he had everything rigged up to make it look like an accident. He had tampered with that emergency bell. Bunnett was to have been induced to enter the refrigerator-room and then the door would have been shut on him. He could have banged away and yelled himself hoarse, but the watchman wouldn't have heard: the room is sound-proof: that's why the bell was installed. Bunnett would have been frozen to a chip by next morning; hadn't the stamina to keep moving all night, like the last bloke who got shut in. Anonymous note found later, to explain his presence in the brewery: or maybe destroyed—yes, it'd have been safer for the murderer to have destroyed the note; Bunnett was always snooping around the brewery, after all. Emergency bell found broken down. It would have been almost impossible to prove it hadn't been an accident. So why, when he had a ripping little scheme like that all taped out, did he put Bunnett on to boil instead."

"That's easy, sir. The reason must have been that he failed to get his victim into the refrigerator-room without a struggle. Bunnett may have pulled the murderer in with him: or he may have opened his mouth to yell and the murderer decided to drag him inside before the watchman heard. Anyway, there was a struggle and the murderer knocked Bunnett out in some way that left a mark on him. That ruined his idea of making the whole thing look like an accident. What's more, I still believe that something was done to Bunnett then that would have given away the identity of the murderer, and that's why the body was put into the copper."

"Yes, that all seems plausible enough. Though, mind you, marks found on Bunnett's body could easily have been attributed to his beating himself in frenzy against the locked door of the refrigerator-room. Still, the murderer might quite likely overlook that, being all of a dither with his original plan going wrong. But what *could be* these tell-tale marks on Bunnett?"

"Well, sir, the murderer might've brought some acid, vitriol say, to throw at Bunnett, supposing his plan went wrong. What sort of person would that suggest?"

"A woman, I suppose."

"Or a doctor?" asked Tyler, a sly and dangerous look in his eyes.

"Possibly."

"Well, then, there might have been marks of acid-burning on Bunnett's face. Or supposing the murderer was left-handed. Medical evidence can generally show when a blow has been struck by a left-handed person. That'd be a give-away all right, eh?"

"Ingenious. Um. I prefer the left-handed idea. Vitriol's a bit too melodramatic. Are any of our troops left-handed?"

"Afraid I haven't noticed, sir. The idea only came to me to-day. We'll find out soon enough, though."

"Well, I'm going along to see Miss Mellors, I think. Get some more dope on Joe Bunnett. Have you any affectionate messages for her?"

"You can ask her what she was doing that afternoon the anonymous letter was posted, and what the devil she means by refusing to give Tollworthy the information."

"O.K. I'll turn on the heat. What's her number? I'd better ring up and see if she's in."

Nigel put through the call and was informed by a maid that Miss Mellors was expected back to tea at four o'clock. He filled in the time walking about the town, drinking in the sunlight and the fragrance of limes and wallflowers. As the Priory clock boomed the hour, Nigel was strolling up Acacia Road, looking for *Le Nid,* as Miss Mellors' house was rather unsuitably named. Ah, there it was. And two doors away stood a neat stone house, the ground-floor shutters closed and the blinds drawn upstairs, presumably Joe Bunnett's. On an impulse, Nigel walked up its stone-flagged path round to the back, and peeked in through the kitchen window. Everything looked tidy, spick-and-span, and deserted.

He turned away and entered the gate of *Le Nid.* There was a witch-ball hanging outside its front door, and on the lintel a rune of welcome done in poker-work and rather indifferent verse. This prepared Nigel for the array of arts and crafts that awaited him within: the drawing-room was full of papier-mâché articles, amateur leatherwork, insipid statuettes, home-made mats and the like. A reproduction of a Van Gogh's flower-painting was the most daring exhibit on view. Apart from this, there was nothing but objects of far too easy virtue. Oh, no; Nigel perceived a small table tucked away behind a screen at the other side of the room, with a few pieces of silver standing upon it. He walked over. Very nice too: heirlooms, presumably: two snuff-boxes, a crucifix, a coffee-pot, a card-case and one of those miniature ivory hands on long, slim handles employed by elegant eighteenth-century ladies when they wished to delouse themselves in public. Nigel was never backward about prying into other people's possessions. He took up a snuff-box and clicked it open: then he fiddled with the lid of the coffee-pot; then he suddenly picked up the snuff-box again and peered at it closely. Stamped on it there was a crest—a dog of dubious ancestry and truculent appearance sitting in a field of corn, with the legend beneath—*Semper Fidelis.* Nigel bent over quickly, and saw the same crest engraved on the coffee-pot and the card-case. Quite absent-mindedly, he slipped the snuff-box into his pocket: and at that moment the voice of Miss Mellors boomed behind him, "Do you make a habit of pocketing the silver, young man?"

Nigel was covered with confusion.

"R-really," he stammered, "I'm t-terribly sorry. No, I don't. I was just thinking of something else at the moment, and it sort of——"

"Conveyed itself into your pocket. I know. And what is this something else you were thinking of?"

"Well," thought Nigel, "two can play at shock tactics." He said:

"I was just wondering whether you have a signet-ring with the same crest on it."

Now it was Miss Mellor's turn to be confounded; and confounded she certainly was. A painful blush spread over her face and neck; her heavy features seemed to dissolve and set again in a queerly lopsided expression.

"A ring? No, I haven't. I mean, I had; but I gave it away. Quite a long time ago."

Nigel was almost as much taken aback by the success of his question as Miss Mellors had been by the question itself. However, drawing a bow at a venture, he said:

"To Joe Bunnett, you mean?"

"Joe—yes—how did you know that? He promised never to——" She broke off, eyeing Nigel suspiciously.

"Never to wear it in public?" he asked.

She nodded silently. Nigel felt a bit ashamed of himself; a bit embarrassed, too, by the utter self-betrayal of her expression when Joe's name was mentioned. Miss Mellors took a grip on herself and said, with something of her old, hearty manner:

"You're a very inquisitive young man, you know. Steal my silver first and then start worming secrets out of me. Are you collecting material for a novel?"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Nigel fervently. "I may be a thief, but at least I'm not a novelist."

Miss Mellors grinned at him, and gave a sharp bark of laughter.

"Well, that's something to be thankful for. All filth and fornication. However, I don't suppose you've come here to discuss the modern novel.

What do you want to know? And what's all this about my—Mr. Bunnett's ring? Has it been found somewhere?"

"Well, yes and no. In a sense—er—that is."

"Fiddlesticks! The ring has been found or it hasn't. Make up your mind, young man."

"No, really. I mean, a piece of it has been found—a piece of the seal."

Nigel tried to keep his tones smooth and ingenuous; but Miss Mellors was not buying it. Her face took on that lopsided appearance again. She asked sharply:

"Found? Where?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that, yet. I should be very grateful, though, if you would tell me more about the ring—and about Joe Bunnett. It's impertinent of me, I know, but——"

"You mean Joe Bunnett is suspected of murdering his brother, and the police want you to do their dirty work for them?"

"Joe is only one of several suspects. You yourself are another——"

"Me? Oh, really, Mr. Strangeways——"

"And as for 'dirty work,' you'd probably find that the inspector was a very much better hand at it than myself."

"All right, young man, don't lose your wool. If you're afraid of a little plain speaking, you've come to the wrong shop."

"I'd welcome a little plain speaking. That's why I'm asking you about Joe Bunnett."

"Good. Now we know where we stand. But let me tell you, if you've got it into your head that Joe killed that unspeakable little swine of a brother of his—though God knows Eustace richly deserved it—you're making the biggest mistake of your young life."

"I sincerely hope so. Well, now, you were going to tell me——"

"When Joe came back from the war, he and I struck up a friendship. We became attached to one another. I had looks in those days—yes, yes, yes, there's no need for you to be polite, I know I'm a battered old war-horse now, though I *am* on the right side of fifty still. An attachment, yes. No sentimental rubbish——" Miss Mellors glared truculently at Nigel—"I never thought Joe was a Greek god or a pantechnicon of all the virtues and I never shall; but we got on all right, and after a bit I popped the question—or he did—I've forgotten which, and we decided to get spliced up. But I made one condition. Joe had got to cut adrift from that blasted brewery. I'm not more bigoted than the next man, but my father drank himself to death and I had to nurse him during the last stages—and if you've ever seen the sodden, snivelling, maudlin wreck that drink can make out of a good man, you'd understand well enough why I wouldn't marry Joe as long as he had anything to do with the liquor trade. Well, Joe started to argue; but I soon shut him up—he'd got to take it or leave it. In the end, he decided to leave it—the brewery, I mean. But he'd reckoned without that ruffian, Eustace. God knows what hold Eustace had over him? Joe always had been under his thumb, but I thought he'd have the guts to break away for my sake. Well, he hadn't. So that was that. I'll never forget that afternoon Joe came to me and said he couldn't do it; white and trembling, and darned ashamed of himself—as well he might be. How I came to fall in l——, to get fond of a weak-willed little whipper-snapper like him, the Creator alone knows. But there it is. Well, I'd given Joe that ring of mine, and when he begged me to let him keep it still—I suppose I was a bit sentimental in those days—I hadn't the heart to take it back. But I wasn't going to have him wearing it in public, and I told him so; there are limits beyond which I won't go as laughing-stock of Maiden Astbury, and that was one of them. Of course, Joe said we'd only got to wait and everything would come out all right. A touch of Mr. Micawber, Joe's always had. I knew better. We've remained the best of friends; but I reconciled myself to dying an old maid, however much poor Joe might blather about silver linings and Came the Dawn. I suppose you're wondering why I tell you all this? Girlish confidences of a decayed gentlewoman, hey?"

"Well, I——"

"You've a sympathetic face, young man, even though you are no Clark Gable. But it's not that—don't flatter yourself. I suppose you've found Joe's ring, or whatever it is, on the scene of the crime. Believe me, you're chasing the wrong hare. If Joe was going to murder that brother of his, he'd have done it when Eustace first came between us. He wouldn't wait the best part of fifteen years to do it. Stands to reason, doesn't it? If he hadn't the sense to cut that little rotter's throat fifteen years ago, he'd certainly not do it last week. I might have been worth doing murder for in those days, but I'm no prize now and I know it. Why doesn't that blasted girl bring in the tea?"

Miss Mellors rang the bell-cord violently. It was an outlet for her emotion and gave her an opportunity to turn away and hide it. When the maid had gone out again, Nigel said:

"Thank you for telling me all this. I agree with what you say: but unfortunately Joe seems to have had other possible motives besides that."

Miss Mellors broke a shortbread biscuit with unnatural deliberation.

"Other motives? I don't believe it. What are they?"

"Well, he inherits his brother's share of the business."

"Yes. . . . Yes, I suppose he does. I hadn't thought of that. But, damn it, Mr. Strangeways, Joe has his faults, but he'd not commit murder for gain."

"N-no. I dare say he wouldn't." Nigel did not feel justified in telling Miss Mellors about Roxby's. She must have sensed that he was keeping something back, for she said:

"What's on your mind, young man?"

"I'm wondering," Nigel prevaricated, "whether it would help Joe at all if you gave me the information you refused to give Sergeant Tollworthy."

"Vacuum-cleaners," said Miss Mellors decisively, after a short pause.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what you ought to be doing. Selling them. You've missed your vocation. Just the right combination of plausibility, low cunning and ruthless salestalk."

"And, like a vacuum-cleaner, I go around picking up the dirt?"

"Why should it help Joe? Eustace wasn't murdered that afternoon."

"No; but, for reasons I can't tell you, we want to know what Joe was doing between the time he left here and the time he reached Poolhampton."

"Driving to Poolhampton, presumably."

"Agreed. But what was his state of mind? Was he just happy and carefree, going off for a holiday? Or was he agitated, moody, taciturn—like someone who's planned to commit a murder the next night?"

"No, not a bit of it: he was quite normal, I can ass——"

"You were with him, then?"

"All right, young man, all right. You needn't be so cockahoop. Don't imagine you've caught me out. I'd every intention of telling you. Joe asked me to drive a bit of the way with him. Actually I went as far as Aldminster and then took the bus back. The conductor will tell you, if you don't believe me."

"You didn't pass through Weston Priors, did you?"

"Weston——? No, that's off the main road. Besides, it's beyond Aldminster."

"Joe picked you up here, and you went with him to Aldminster."

"No, not here, I met him on Honeycombe Hill."

"Accidentally?"

"No, I'm telling you, we'd arranged to drive together."

"Was Joe wearing the ring during this drive?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you give this information to Tollworthy?"

"The man's a gossip. I don't want my private affairs blabbed about all over the town."

"But surely there's no reason why you shouldn't go for a drive with an old friend?"

"Don't be a fool. Of course there isn't. But Maiden Astbury doesn't need reasons for gossiping; all it needs is an excuse."

"How long had you to wait for the bus at Aldminster?"

"About quarter of an hour. We got in at about two-forty-five and the bus leaves at three."

"And Joe picked you up when?"

"Two-fifteen sharp."

"You took half an hour to cover the ten miles odd to Aldminster?"

"There was no hurry. We had plenty to talk about."

"And Joe seemed to you quite normal?"

"Of course he did. I've told you that once. Perfectly normal he was, talking about the cruise and so on." Miss Mellors got quite angry over it.

Nigel did his best to pacify her. Then, thanking her very much for the tea and the information, he returned to the Cammisons. While the interview was fresh in his mind, he wanted to test its bearings on the case. He took out a large sheet of paper, and wrote rapidly in his small, scholarly hand:

Joe Bunnett.

(i) Additional motive for killing Eustace—Eustace's interference between him and Miss Mellors. His hatred of E. for this should have cooled in fifteen years: depends on character—some people break out at once, others smoulder. The Roxby's affair might well have fanned the more personal motive into flame: brought to a head J.'s life-long repression by his brother.

(ii) It was a piece of Joe's ring I found in the refrigerator-room. This is damning evidence that he was there on the night of the murder. Unless Mellors is lying about J.'s being in possession of the ring when he went off for his holiday. And why should she lie? (Echo answers, why?)

(iii) The anonymous letter. If Mellors' evidence is correct, Joe had quarter of an hour to get from Aldminster to Poolhampton, which is a distance of five and a half miles. (c.f. Tollworthy's time-chart.) This would give him time, if he hurried, to make the four miles detour by Weston Priors and post the letter. Arrivals and departures will have to be verified by Tyler.

(iv) J.'s state of mind. Mellors insisted (with perhaps too much vigour?) that he was perfectly normal. Wasn't the whole business of this drive rather odd, though? M. and J. (according to M.) didn't want to be gossiped about: yet what more fruitful source of gossip could there be than M. going off with J. at the beginning of his holiday?—the fact that M. returned soon afterwards would be no obstacle to scandal-mongers, merely an additional juicy fact to speculate about. True, steps were taken to avoid discovery—M.'s meeting J. outside the town: but J. was well known in the county—M., too, probably—and they might easily have been seen driving together. Rather risky for them, surely? Which suggests that it was worth their taking this risk. Why? Obvious answers: either *(a)* Joe had planned to kill E., and was taking a sort of nerve-tonic, plus a farewell in case he got caught; *(b)* All this, and in addition M. was to give him, unwillingly, an alibi for the posting of the letter (if so, this must have failed somehow); *(c)* Joe and Mellors were in collaboration over the crime, and took this opportunity of talking over the details. But if *(b)* or *(c)*, why has not J. a better alibi over the anonymous letter?

Nigel sat back and read his notes over again. Several points began to stand out and suggest a quite different pattern—a most unexpected and sinister pattern, too. He took another sheet of paper and wrote:

Ariadne Mellors.

(i) No alibi for night of murder. Maid sleeps out. Suggests innocence, but might be double bluff.

(ii) Has physical strength to have laid out Bunnett and conveyed him into the copper.

(iii) Might conceivably have gained enough knowledge from Joe to write the anonymous letter and be familiar with geography of brewery. Is she expert enough to have tampered with the emergency bell in that way? (Good with her hands, c.f. the art-and-craft stuff in her house.) Main difficulty here—how could she explain her presence in the brewery to Eustace? Almost insuperable, this. Pass on. Joe might have told her about Roxby's; so she might have stolen the Roxby's correspondence to divert suspicion. But suspicion thus diverted on to Joe. Surely she wouldn't want this?—but see (v).

(iv) Motives. Very strong. *(a)* Her horror of drink—father drank himself to death—effect on daughter incalculable. By killing Eustace she would kill two brewers with one stone—Joe would be free from brother's influence and thus enabled to give up the trade. *(b)* Personal hatred of E.

for his influence over J., all the stronger in a woman of her domineering character. *(c)* Death of Eustace would free Joe to marry her. . . .

(v) Is it possible that she murdered E. and is trying to incriminate Joe? Latter, *either* because she's lost her nerve, *or* from a subconscious hatred of J. for having through moral weakness deprived her of wifehood and motherhood in the past. Sounds a bit fantastic, but would explain several points—*(a)* Her comparative readiness to tell me about the ring. N. B., I have nothing but her word to support J.'s ownership of ring. Her confusion when I first mentioned it may have been due, not to coyness about Joe, but to her being made suddenly aware that we had found a clue to *her own* presence in the refrig.-room. Whole story of giving ring to J. may thus be result of Mellors' losing her head. *(Note:* Ask hotel servants, etc., at Poolhampton if J. was wearing ring.) *(b)* Mellors admitted to animus against Eustace—innocence or cunning? *(c)* She also manifested a certain degree of contempt for Joe. *(d)* "I shall never forget that afternoon Joe came to me and said he couldn't do it; white and trembling"—was this a subtle way of impressing me with the idea of Joe as a potential murderer? *(e)* At one point she said, "What's all this about my—Mr. Bunnett's ring?" If ring had been in Joe's possession all those years, would she have begun to say *"my ring"?* Possibly. A negligible point, this. *(f)* Her protestations that Joe seemed perfectly normal during the drive may have been *deliberately* over-emphasised in order to make me suspect her of concealing the fact that J. was not normal.

(vi) The anonymous letter. It is noticeable that Mellors gives herself something very like an alibi for this. She got out of J.'s car at Aldminster at two-forty-five: this wouldn't have given her time to get to Weston Priors and back before the bus started unless she hired another car—which would obviously be too dangerous. If she wrote the letter, it must have been posted in one of two ways—*(a)* she asked J. to post it at Weston Priors *en route* for Poolhampton (but W. P. isn't *en route:* therefore, unless M. and J. were in collusion, M. could surely give him no plausible reason why she wouldn't post it herself in Aldminster. Anyway, he'd almost certainly see Eustace's name on the envelope, which would be fatal for M.) *(b)* J. and M. made a detour and posted it before they got to Aldminster: this would account for the unusual length of time they took over the journey.

Nigel studied all this with an expression of distaste. It struck him as rather ponderous and much too theoretical. The only thing in its favour was that it would give some direction to the police inquiries in the

Aldminster district. After another twenty minutes, he took a third sheet of notepaper, and slowly wrote:

(i) Joe Bunnett. Best tip so far.

(ii) Collusion between Joe and Miss Mellors. Promising; but, if there was collusion, surely they could have thought up a more definite alibi for the anonymous letter. Only two explanations so far: either the alibi has been deliberately made rather weak, or M. has lost her head.

(iii) Miss Mellors. The most likely outsider at long odds.

Chapter XI

July 20, 8–11.30 a.m.

He that gropes in the dark finds that he would not.
ENGLISH PROVERB

"No," thought Nigel, sipping his early morning tea, "this case is not really my dish at all. Its grotesque apparatus flattered but to deceive. Eustace Bunnett, thy bones are marrowless. From fair beginnings the case is falling away to foul routine. The police will take reams more of evidence, they will test every alibi, they will indulge in orgies of deduction—and, at the end of it all, someone will come forward and state that they saw X emerging from the brewery on the fatal night dripping with gore. That's the way murder cases are solved. Or else, in a couple of days' time, the chief constable will arise from his dreams of foxes and five-barred gates and call in the Yard, and some bright spark will be sent down and maybe discover the criminal's identity, but there won't be enough evidence to justify a prosecution, and one more will be added to the number of suspected murderers tripping it with light fantastic toe over the bodies of baffled policemen. And I must say I shan't be wild with regrets. Eustace Bunnett was a crook, a menace, and a stunger. We can get along very well without him. And the case can get along very well without me."

No doubt things would have turned out this way. A long, tedious investigation, with the police doing their best to give the murderer enough rope to hang himself with. But for one fact: the fact, which in an hour's time Nigel would be compelled to realise, that the criminal was in a hurry. Unlike most murderers, whose trump card—if they have the nerve to play it—is to sit tight and say next to nothing, this one had a crying need for haste. Every minute was precious to him, and no one could deny afterwards that he had acted with skill and despatch. Nor could one deny that it was the very conditions of the crime itself that inexorably laid the toils into which the criminal fell. A very neat—in fact, an almost classic—performance by Nemesis, but reflecting little credit, Nigel considered, on himself and the other mortal agents of that unchancy goddess. All he could take credit for was that he tumbled to the murderer's identity at nine-ten this Monday night: but it was a purely academic success on his part; for the murderer was destined to be caught anyway only a few hours later.

Nigel's first indication that the march of events was accelerating into a double came at exactly 8.27 a.m. The telephone bell rang, Nigel was summoned, and the inspector's voice barked from the other end:

"Mr. Strangeways? Tyler speaking. From the brewery. Been trouble here last night. Night-watchman caught someone on the premises. The fellow got away. Rang us up at once—Lock, I mean—and we made a search immediately. Couldn't find anything. Making a more thorough search now. If you'd care to give me the benefit of your co-operation—"

Tyler was in the habit of coming out unexpectedly with stilted phrases like this, otherwise Nigel might have suspected a latent sarcasm. But the inspector's voice sounded edgy and irritable: probably furious with himself for not keeping an adequate watch over the brewery, and taking it out on some wretched subordinate, thought Nigel; though no one could have expected——"

"O.K.," he said, "I'll be along in quarter of an hour."

Ten minutes of that was spent in breakfast; and, as Herbert Cammison said, if any two other men could put down as much breakfast in the time, he'd like to know their names. The remaining five minutes brought Nigel to the brewery. Tyler was certainly doing himself proud; there seemed to be policemen everywhere, poking about, asking questions, or just standing still and radiating suspicion. The employees, too, were obviously affected by the excitement in the atmosphere; they worked spasmodically, outbreaks of furious energy followed by pauses for muttered talk and covert glances. Only the girls employed in the bottling processes tended their levers and conveyors without a break in their mechanical, jerky, marionette-like ritual.

"Quite like old times," said Mr. Barnes coming across Nigel on his way through the bottling-room: "Never seen 'em working like this since the guv'nor popped it. Eh, well, it's an ill wind—as the saying goes. And to what do we owe the pleasure of this visit from you, sir?"

"The murderer."

Mr. Barnes' eyebrows shot up and remained levitated, as it were, against the white expanse of his brow.

"Meaning, if I take you rightly, that the bloke Lock surprised in here last night is His Nibs in person. He must have a nerve. Well, they say the murderer always returns to the scene of his crime, don't they?"

"Um. Of course, if the murderer is an employee here, he couldn't very well help returning to the scene of the crime, could he? Darned disturbing for the chap having that copper staring him in the face all day, don't you think?"

"Copper? Oh, I get you. I thought for a moment you was referring to our Boy Blue, our esteemed Inspector Tyler." The head brewer's lugubrious countenance performed the unnerving contortions that represented his idea of a smile. "Which reminds me. Don't bandy any witticisms with Tyler this morning, if you take my advice. Fair raging he is. Swallowed a fish-bone he has, proper. Badgering me about that pressure-copper again just now, so I said—humorous-like, but quite friendly—'there's a ruddy sight too many coppers in the brewery this morning,' I said. My word, that didn't half set him off. Somebody ought to design a safety-valve for that man or he'll blow his lid off one of these days."

"Dear me, that would never do. Where is he now, by the way?"

"Up in the guv'nor's room."

As Nigel arrived outside Eustace Bunnett's door, he heard the voice of the inspector raised in querulous indigation.

"What the hell do you think I put you at the brewery gate for? First you let the fellow get in and then you let him walk out again."

"I can't be in two places at once, sir," a sullen voice replied.

"And none of your lip, my lad, either! I suppose you went to sleep, eh?"

"No, sir."

Nigel thought it was time for someone to pour a little oil on these troubled waters. He entered.

"Oh, there you are," said Tyler ungraciously. "This damned fool"—he jerked his head towards the red-faced and sweating young constable who stood at attention beside the desk—"has let the murderer slip through his fingers."

Nigel gathered that the constable had been on guard at the main gates, had heard shouts from within the brewery at about ten to one that morning, had rushed inside and met the night-watchman in full career after the intruder. Only the intruder somehow had got lost. The constable swore he had not passed by *him,* while Lock swore with equal vehemence that he had been escaping in the direction of the main entrance.

"How did the chap get in, anyway?" asked Nigel.

This turned out to be a somewhat tactless question. For it had been made apparent that, unless the intruder had climbed over the high wall—

and there was not a trace of his having done so—he must have entered by the side door in Ledgett's Lane; and that side door had not been guarded.

"How should I know he'd be likely to return to the brewery?" complained the inspector. "Why, it was only a formality stationing Palmer at the main gate."

"Who has keys of the side entrance?"

"There was one on Mr. Bunnett's ring. Joe Bunnett has one, and Mr. Barnes and Ed Parsons. Anyone could have taken an impression, of course, and had a key made."

"Or anyone might have stayed behind in the brewery and hidden after the day's work was over. Then he could have stolen the master-key out of the office."

"The master-key hasn't been stolen," replied Tyler sourly. "Besides, if the chap had stayed behind, why did he wait so long to do whatever he wanted to do?"

"Yes. That's so. But what *did* he want to do? Destroy evidence?"

"I suppose so. It was in this corridor outside here that Lock found the fellow. But there's no sign of anything having been taken out of this room. Or from Mr. Joe Bunnett's. Lock seems to think he surprised the chap before he'd got properly to work, and I'd say that's quite likely. What worries me more is that I can't think of anything in the nature of evidence which the murderer'd want to destroy. We went through these rooms and the office very carefully a couple of days ago; we'd have found it then, if——"

"It must be something which doesn't appear incriminating on the face of it, but the murderer knows to be a danger to him." Nigel snapped his fingers and went on excitedly. "Look here, this must link up with the burglary of Eustace's house. Suppose Eustace had something in his possession—letters, say—that would point to the murderer's identity. Murderer ransacks his study, fails to find them, and steals the Roxby's correspondence in order to confuse the trail. The next night he comes to the brewery, hoping to find what he's looking for in Eustace's room here."

"Yes, that's all very well; but what *is* this piece of evidence? There was nothing in here with the remotest bearing on the murder; just business documents."

"Perhaps there's a secret drawer, or an oubliette, or something jolly of that sort."

"I've told you. We've searched this room, sir. And when we search a room, we do it properly," said Tyler, visibly aggrieved.

"Yes, I'm sure you do. Oh, well, I'd fancy a talk with Lock. Is he here still?"

"I'll send for him."

A few minutes later, Lock entered with his stiff, military stride. Nigel asked him to repeat his story of what had happened last night.

"It was like this, sir. I'd finished the midnight round of inspection and was sitting in that little room near the main entrance, taking a breather. After a bit, somehow—you know how it is—I seemed to remember hearing a sound I didn't ought to have heard."

"What sort of a sound?"

"I didn't connect it with anything just then. You see, I didn't hear it, in a manner of speaking. I remembered that there'd been a sound, that's all—like when you're busy on something, you don't hear the traffic outside, and yet you do hear it——"

"Subconsciously?"

"That'd be it, sir, no doubt. I've thought about it since, and—as I told Mr. Tyler here—I'd make a guess it was the noise a swing door makes closing; you know, the kind that work by air-compression. Anyway, I goes along—it was just after quarter to one—the way where I remembered the sound to have come from."

"Turn on any lights?"

"Bless you, no sir. I knows my way about here in the dark like a mole. I'd a torch, of course; but I didn't want to use it in case it should give away my position to the enemy. A proper night-attack—that's what I wanted to spring on the blighter, see? Well, I came upstairs quiet, and just as I rounded the corner at the other end of this passage, I saw someone outside the door of Mr. Bunnett's room. There's a bit of light comes in through the skylight just above; not what you'd call light, but not as dark as the stairs; just enough for me to see a sort of figure. So I clicked on my torch; only, me standing close against the wall, the movement hit the torch against it about a second before the light went on—the button's a bit stiff, you see. The blighter heard the sound and it gave him time to nip round the corner and be off; moved like a bleeding streak of lightning, he did, if you'll pardon the expression: just saw his tail-light whisking off, as you might say. I goes after him, thinking he'd be bound to run out by the front entrance, but seems like he didn't."

"You didn't hear him running away?"

"No. It's a long passage, you see; by the time I'd got to the other end, he could have been half-way to Margate. He must've had rubber-soled shoes, though, or I'd've heard him clattering down the stairs."

"This figure you saw standing by the door—which Mr. Bunnett's door, by the way?"

"Couldn't say for sure. Mr. Eustace's, I presumed. I dunno."

"We'll come back to that. The figure. Could you say anything more about it? Height? Bulk? Sex?"

"No, sir. It was quite still a second, and I stood quite still. I got an impression that it was bending forward, as it might be to feel for the keyhole. Reckon I thought it was a ghost for a second."

"Perhaps it was," said Tyler irritably. "I'm half-inclined to think you imagined the whole thing."

"Not me, sir. No. It was a bloke all right. But more than that I can't tell you—unless you'd like me to imagine a lot o' details as I never saw," he added with heavy humour.

"Get that torch, will you?" Nigel asked.

"What's all this?" said the inspector suspiciously, when Lock had departed on his errand.

"An experiment in optics—if that's the word I'm groping for."

Lock returned. Nigel inspected the torch and noted that the button was still stiff. He stationed Lock at the end of the corridor where he had been the night before, and himself stood outside the door of Eustace Bunnett's room.

"Now," he said, "shut your eyes tight. Count ten. Then click on the torch; try and hit the end of it against the wall first, like you did last night. When you know the torch is lit, open your eyes."

Nigel leant forward to the door. When he heard the tap of the torch against the wall, he paused a fraction of a second, then raced for the corner.

"No good, sir! I seen you!" Lock called out. He had grasped the point of the experiment now. They repeated it several times, Lock deliberately taking longer to switch on the torch before he opened his eyes. But every time he saw Nigel before he could get round the corner.

"It's proved then, that the chap was not trying to get into Eustace's room. Now we'll try Joe's."

Joe Bunnett's door was only a yard from the end of the corridor, nearer to it than Eustace's though on the same side. This second set of experiments had a very different result. The first time, Lock saw Nigel just before he turned the corner, the second time he only saw the tail of his coat, the third time he saw nothing at all.

"That's that, then," said Nigel. "There's reasonable evidence that the person you saw was trying to get into Joe Bunnett's room."

"Or just coming out," said the inspector, who had been looking on.

"Now we've got to turn Joe's room upside down. There's just *got* to be something there. I don't believe the murderer would have had time to remove it. A trained watchman like Lock would become conscious of that sound—the swing-door or whatever it was—very soon after his subconscious mind had noted it. A reaction of ten to thirty seconds, I'd say. But even supposing it was a minute, or two or three minutes—even that would hardly give the intruder time to open the drawers, perhaps the safe, and get what he had come to get. Obviously he didn't know exactly where the thing was to be found, or he wouldn't have wasted time burgling Eustace's house the night before."

The inspector looked cunning. "Suppose the intruder was Joe Bunnett himself. Suppose the burglary at his brother's house was simply to get hold of those Roxby's papers, and there was something else in his room here he had to have too. *He'd* be able to find it quickly enough. *And* he's the most likely person to have a key to his own room, what's more."

"Yes. That's true. Though I can't understand why he shouldn't have burgled Eustace's study and his own room on the same night. Does he ration himself to one deed of darkness per twenty-four hours? Seems rather whimsical. Well, let's make a last attempt to crack this nut."

They entered Joe Bunnett's room. A safe, a desk, a filing cupboard, a threadbare carpet, a photograph of an outing of the brewery employees, a pencil drawing of *The Gannett,* and a few chairs, formed the bulk of the furniture.

"You searched the room this morning?' Nigel asked.

"Yes."

"Dust?"

"No good, sir. We left too many marks in the dust during our first search to be able to pick out any fresh ones. There are no new fingerprints."

Nigel opened a drawer in the desk at random. It contained nothing but copies of *Razzle* and *Film Fun.* He closed it hastily, murmuring:

"Tut-tut. A harem. Revealing, but not pertinent."

He poked his fingers into one of the pigeonholes. "He put in his thumb and pulled out a plum—no, not a plum, a passport."

He flipped over the pages idly. The usual debauched-looking photograph. "Joseph Bunnett. Age forty-eight. Height, five feet eight inches. Fair hair. Moustache. The usual stuff. Visaed for France and Switzerland last year." Nigel starting rummaging again. Then he stiffened suddenly and let out a wild whoop.

"Eureka!"

"How much? Wasp stung you, sir?"

"Not wasp. Idea. Yes, why not? Joe wants to get out of country. Wants his passport. All quite regular. What about it?"

Tyler scratched his chin. "Um. There's something in that. Yes. But, look here, if he'd planned to kill Eustace and clear out of the country, surely he wouldn't forget to have his passport with him?"

"No. But supposing all that cruise business was meant for an alibi, and something went radically wrong with it. Suppose he intended to turn up in Maiden Astbury after a decent interval and say, 'Well, boys, I only heard about my brother being dead when I put in at Falmouth,' or words to that effect; and suppose for some reason that plan got scuppered, and he realised that Fortune (fickle jade) had given him a kick in the pants, then what's more likely than that he should lose his head and make a bolt for it—calling in for his passport *en route?"*

"I dare say. Well, that may give us something to work on."

"Something to work on? That's meiosis. Don't you see—he's in a tearing hurry now. *He'll be coming back for his passport again.* He's got to have it, and then we have him."

"Optimistic, aren't you? You must know by now that we could have him arrested wherever he lands in France."

"No; because he doesn't know that *we* know that it's the passport he's after. He has no reason to believe that we suspect him yet to the extent of warning the French police. He imagines that we're still swimming round in circles looking for *The Gannet."*

"Something in that. Where's he hiding, though? That's what I'd like to know. Can't be far away if it's him that's been doing these burglaries."

"Maybe he's staying at the Royal Hotel, disguised as the Archdeacon of Wessex."

"And maybe my name is Winston Churchill," retorted the inspector ferociously.

Nigel stared at his shoe-laces. He went to stub out his cigarette in an ash-tray on the mantelpiece. The ash-tray, he noticed, was one of those advertising ones; "Castle Brand Mineral Waters" was stamped on it.

"An Englishman's home is his castle," murmured Nigel. Then, pianissimo, "I suppose Joe Bunnett is not hiding in his own house, Tyler?"

"His own!—what?—Do you think he's crazy?" the inspector almost shouted.

"No. Perhaps just cleverer than we thought. Have you searched the house?"

The inspector's eyes swivelled away from Nigel. He looked uncomfortable. "Searched the house? Well, no, sir. We had no call to; I mean, we couldn't possibly suppose—it's ridiculous," he blustered—"of course, we've been through his study and bedroom—on Saturday morning it was—to see if there was anything that'd give a clue to his present whereabouts. But we've not been all through the house, not torn up the floors, and tapped the walls and all that hokey-pokey. When the search was made, there was no reason to suppose he was the murderer."

"Shades of the Bow Street Runners!" Nigel ejaculated to himself. Aloud he said, "Well, I should think a careful search ought to be made now, don't you?"

The inspector conceded this, somewhat grudgingly. He did not enjoy being caught out in an error. To hide his feelings and reassure himself, he proceeded first with a meticulous examination of the room. Every paper was taken out, perused and tossed over to Nigel. It was thus that the second discovery of the morning took place. In a drawer, mixed up with a number of personal letters, several ancient dance programmes, the menu of a regimental dinner, and some extra-strong peppermints, they found a document, duly signed and witnessed, by which Joe Bunnett bequeathed everything of which he should die possessed—to Ariadne Mellors.

"Well, for crying aloud!" exclaimed Nigel. "This really is a most ill-regulated case. First we don't get a sniff of a clue, and now they're raining down on us like autumn leaves—and all pointing different ways—more like the Sibyl's leaves, I should say."

"May be significant, after what you told me about your interview with Miss Mellors yesterday."

"Um. Opens up all sorts of avenues. As for instance, Mellors may have planned to murder Joe as well as Eustace; motive, to get the brewery into her own hands and close it down—staggering blow to the liquor trade; then lost her nerve and decided to get hold of this compromising will and destroy it—or keep it till things had blown over. Or she may have been in collusion with Joe, may even have been hiding him in her own house: one or other of them kills Eustace; then Joe loses his nerve, and Mellors has to silence him—I never could imagine why Lady Macbeth didn't put something in her husband's coffee when he started making embarrassing remarks at the dinner-table. Come to think of it, there's a good deal of superficial resemblance between the Macbeths and Joe and Miss Mellors. Well, she kills Joe to safeguard herself, and comes after the will for the same reason. There are any number of possible permutations and combinations of this situation."

"No doubt," said the inspector dryly. "I'm not interested in sums just at the moment, though. We'll find out where Miss Mellors was last night, and then look over Joe Bunnett's house."

Miss Mellors was not in. The maid had not seen her that morning, but Miss Mellors always cooked and washed up her own breakfast, and was often out before the maid arrived. They were on the point of taking their leave when the girl exploded a bombshell. Nigel had remarked aside to Tyler that, as she went home after dinner every night, she could know nothing about her mistress's movements. The girl overheard this: a sly look came into her eyes: she said she had been talking over the garden fence that morning with her friend, Iris, who worked next door; Iris told her that last night she had been saying goodnight to her boy inside the gate just before twelve o'clock, and they'd seen Miss Mellors come out of her house ever so stealthy and hurry down the road. In which direction? The maid pointed. Ah, thought Nigel past Joe Bunnett's house towards the brewery. This was a push-over. The inspector knew that Joe Bunnett left the keys of his house in Miss Mellors' charge when he went off on holiday. He had borrowed them for his previous search. The maid was sent off to fetch them. After a few minutes she returned, looking bewildered, and said that the keys were gone from the hook they usually hung on; they'd been there yesterday evening, she'd happened to notice: funny goings-on, wasn't it?

The inspector thanked her brusquely, asked her to show him the telephone and rang up his headquarters. He arranged for several men to come up at once, two to cover the back of Joe Bunnett's house, another with a bunch of skeleton keys to open the doors and a fourth to guard the front gate. Meanwhile he and Nigel waited in the porch of *Le Nid.* In six minutes' time, a couple of plainclothes men walked past and gave an unobtrusive signal meaning that the rear of the house was now covered. The inspector and Nigel followed. One man stayed at Bunnett's gate, the other walked up the neat flagged path behind them. The house seemed preternaturally still: its closed shutters gave it a vacuous look: was there a madman's brain hidden behind that blind, vacant front? Nigel wondered; or the desperate frenzy of a murderer, nervous as a hair-trigger after three days of suspense, isolation and peril, cornered now, ready to break out? It was strange to think that he had never set eyes on this man whom they had now run to earth. Or had they? Was it conceivable that he would have the cold nerve to stay on in his own house all this time?

A key clicked and the door opened. The inspector shouldered his way past his subordinate into the dark hall. Nigel followed, instinctively putting out his hands as though to ward off the blow that might fall out of the shadows. But no blow came: no sound, except the harsh echoes of their own feet on the stone floor. Dining-room, empty. Lounge, empty. Furniture shrouded in white dust-covers. Tyler plucked these covers away one by one. Kitchen, empty. Cellar, empty. Every cupboard, every cranny was explored. Not a word had yet been spoken; that was odd, thought Nigel; there was something oppressive about the house that forbade them to talk, even in whispers. They filed upstairs. One, two, three bedrooms, all empty. At the end of the passage, a smaller room—Joe's sanctum; sporting prints on the walls; a bureau; fishing rod and golf clubs in a corner; a shove-halfpenny board; a deep arm-chair facing the fireplace, its back to them, shrouded, too, in a dustcover. Automatically the inspector moved up to it and twitched off the cover. He gasped. The armchair was the one thing in the house that was not empty. Ariadne Mellors was sitting there, her head battered in.

For several seconds the three stood there, stunned by that discovery. Then Nigel said in a whisper:

"That's a steep price to pay for the proof of one's innocence."

As though this released him into activity, the inspector started furiously to work. It was almost unimaginable that the murderer could still be in the house, but Tyler sent his subordinate to search bathroom, lavatory, linen-cupboard and whatever else there might be, while he himself telephoned for assistance. Nigel glanced from the hideous thing slumped in the chair to the blood-stained poker that lay in the grate. A shattered electric torch on the floor, patches of blood between fireplace and desk. Miss Mellors must have entered the room, surprised the murderer (or had he been lying in wait for her?) and been killed without preamble or mercy. Had she had time even to scream once, it would surely have been heard next door and reported. Nigel felt sick. He was, he realised, indirectly responsible for this. Interviewing Miss Mellors yesterday evening, he had made it all too plain that Joe Bunnett was under grave suspicion; so she had come over last night, surely to find if he had left any incriminating evidence against himself and to destroy it if need be. *Semper Fidelis* was the family motto of that uncouth, comical, ill-starred woman; she had lived up to it and died by it. It was unthinkable that, if she had been Joe's accomplice in the murder of Eustace, Joe should have killed her: for, as an accomplice, she would have known of his hiding place and he would have expected her to visit him there; whereas, if Joe *was* the murderer at all, he had evidently struck out at his visitor of last night in the darkness and desperate panic, not realising who she was.

But there was still no definite proof that Joe had murdered Eustace, apart from the fragment of the signet-ring found in the refrigerator-room. It was possible that someone else, the real murderer, might have got possesion of the ring or had a replica made, and left the clue behind to implicate Joe. On the other hand, if the murderer was not Joe, what was he doing in this house last night? Nigel clicked his fingers. Got it! Planting some more false evidence. Well then. Yes, it fits in. We thought that Joe killed his brother and hid himself here. But surely three nights in this house would be bound to leave some traces of occupation. Yet we've found none. This cuts both ways, though. If the murderer wants to make us believe that Joe has been skulking here and therefore is the killer, he'd surely have faked some evidence pointing to that. Perhaps Miss Mellors caught him out before he had time to do that. Yet he couldn't have known that the police would not make a detailed examination of the house till to-day. Perhaps there is some evidence, planted or genuine, which we've failed to discover. Damn! How could any evidence have been planted when Miss Mellors kept the only keys of the house. Had anyone else a set of keys? There must be a duplicate for the front door, at least. Only Joe Bunnett, surely. Still, I suppose somebody might have taken an impression of his key and had another made. More work for the inspector. Perhaps they'll feel inclined to call in the Yard after all this.

Nigel found that, lost in thought, he had wandered into the passage. He lit a cigarette and, in his absent way, dropped the match on the carpet. This reminded him of Sophie Cammison and her strictures about his untidiness. He bent down to pick it up; as he did so, he observed a faint round dent in the thick pile of the carpet; then another, then two more. Somebody, quite recently, had been standing on a chair just here—that was the obvious interpretation. Nigel called to the policemen whom Tyler had sent to search the rest of the house.

"You been standing on a chair here?"

"Chair? No, sir. Not investigated this passage yet."

"Good. Must be the murderer. Get me one, will you—a chair, I mean, not a murderer. Don't leave your prints on it."

Nigel placed the chair-legs in the indentations. They fitted.

"Um. Must've been this one or another of similar pattern. Find all the chairs of this size and shape of leg in the house, and have 'em tried for fingerprints."

He took off his coat, spread it over the seat, and climbed gingerly upon it. The passage-ceiling was now only a foot above his head. It was papered in the same loud and riotous pattern as the walls. But from his vantage-point Nigel could see four sides of a square outlined against the pattern. A trap-door! Using his handkerchief, he pushed gently upwards. The trap yielded. Only when his head was through the opening did he realise that it might be, for him a trap in more senses than one. The murderer might be up there, under the roof, nervous as a hair-trigger cornered! In an involuntary spasm of fear, Nigel closed his eyes an instant. Then he opened them again and looked round. There was nobody there. He hauled himself through the opening. The joists were boarded over for half the length of the attic. Some oddments lay on the boards; a few boxes, an old tin of paint, a scrap-book. But he paid no attention to them. What held his gaze was the pile of rugs and the cushion spread out beside them. Here at least was proof that the murderer had been hiding out here: no, it wasn't proof, this might be the faked evidence—and faked with what fiendish ingenuity and self-confidence, too. Nigel inspected the pile of bedding closely. A faint odour hung about the cushion. Brilliantine. Nigel remembered the photo of Joe Bunnett in Eustace's house, the smarmed-down hair. Taking out a pocket magnifying-glass he studied the cushion. One or two hairs were clinging to it. He put them away in an envelope. Next he noticed some crumbs lying in the cracks between the boards; with tweezers and infinite delicacy he extracted them and dropped them into another envelope; taking them under the skylight he examined them; they were still soft, some of them, and some of them smelt—smelt—smelt—what was the smell?—Ah, carraway-seed.

Nigel proceeded to ransack the boxes. It was then that he made his last and most lurid discovery. Behind the torn lining of a suitcase he found a handkerchief, spattered with fresh bloodstains. There would be no fingerprints on that poker in the study; the murderer had held its handle in this handkerchief. Nigel unfolded the crumpled square of linen. At one corner were marked the initials, J. B.

Chapter XII

July 20, 11.30 a.m.–5.15 p.m.

He holds him with his skinny hand,
"There was a ship," quoth he.
COLERIDGE, *The Ancient Mariner*

The medical examination bore out the self-evident fact that Miss Mellors had been killed somewhere about midnight with the poker that was lying in the grate. She had been struck down by somebody standing in front of her; which suggested, though it did not prove, that the murderer was already in the room before she entered. So, at least, the inspector read it. Nigel considered it interpretable in another way; it might mean that the murderer was known to Miss Mellors and trusted by her, otherwise he would not have risked letting her see him by getting in front of the beam of her torch. A more sinister feature of the crime was revealed when Herbert Cammison stated, with his usual objective and precise utterance, that—as far as he could tell on a cursory examination—the victim had been killed by the first blow—a right-handed one, and the murderer then must have continued wildly striking at her long after he'd known she was dead.

Panic or hatred? thought Nigel. If it was panic, then Joe Bunnett was most likely their man; if hatred, it could be that shadowy and abominably ingenious X who—they might yet prove—had been scattering false evidence against Joe with such a light touch, such masterly discrimination and lack of over-emphasis. Inspector Tyler, after being shown the contents of the attic, was in no two minds about it. Nothing remained, as far as he was concerned, but to get a warrant for Joe Bunnett's arrest and find him. His description would now be broadcast all over England; police at every port would be warned to prevent him embarking for a foreign country: it could only be a matter of days. Hours, more probably; for he could not move out of England till he had regained possession of his passport.

Three different sets of fingerprints were exposed in the house. One belonged to Miss Mellors, the second to the woman who "did for" Joe

Bunnett and had cleaned up the house on the afternoon of his departure: the third, presumably, was Joe's, though that could not be proved till they had caught him. No fingerprints, however, were found on the few possible surfaces in the attic. This was a point slightly in favour of the hypothetical X being a reality, Nigel considered. All the other fingerprints might have been made by Joe before he went on his holiday; whereas it was unlikely—though not impossible—that, if he had been living in the attic for three days and nights, he would have left no prints. The inspector, anyway, was too busy to listen to any such wild hypothesis from Nigel. Before the routine work in Joe Bunnett's house was finished, Tyler received a message which made him busier still.

The Poolhampton police were on the phone—straining at the wire, in fact. They asked Tyler to come down at once. *The Gannet* had been located, and they also had information about the motor-bicycle over which he had asked them to make inquiries. The inspector jerked out orders all round, put Sergeant Tollworthy in charge on the spot, and was soon racing the twenty miles to the coast, sitting in the back of the police car with Nigel.

They were greeted at the station by Superintendent Flaxenham, a tall, red-faced man, slow of speech but evidently capable. With little preamble he pointed to a large-scale ordnance map lying upon the table.

"See that indentation there?" he said. "That's a small cove, used by smugglers once, they say: deep water entrance, even at low tide—the shore shelves sharply there, you see; high cliffs on either side; and inland" —the superintendent stabbed a large forefinger at the map and tapped it several times—"inland is Basket Down, a lonely expanse of upland uninhabited save for a few farms situated in the deep combes, typical of this countryside." Flaxenham was evidently deriving his inspiration at this point from the local guide-book, Nigel noted. "For reasons, which will transpire in due course," Flaxenham continued meatily, "this area has lately been rendered ever more desolate than heretofore. Since receiving your message, we have been making inquiries along the coast—in the villages, camping grounds, farms and so on—relative to *The Gannet.* No one had seen her, nor at first did we find anyone who had noticed anything untoward on Thursday night. Yesterday afternoon, however, we received a report from Constable Harker. Harker is stationed in the hamlet of Biddle Monachorum, which—you will observe—is five miles west of Basket Cove. Harker reported that the proprietor of the Jolly Monk had laid the following information before him. On Saturday night a tramp, name of Ezekiel Penny, came into his pub and in the course of conversation commented upon a fire he had seen on Basket Down early on Friday morning. The proprietor, Harry Bean, said he'd heard nothing of any fire and hinted that Penny must've been properly boozed up or maybe dreamed it all. Whereupon the man Penny grew very heated, swore he was sober as a judge and had been an abstemious man all his life, and as for dreaming it—it couldn't be that because he'd been asleep and only seen the fire when he woke up. Penny came in for a good deal of chaffing from the fellows in the bar, of course. One chap asked him had the fire taken the shape of a flaming serpent, and so on: but Penny stuck to it he'd seen a glow in the sky, seaward in the direction of Basket Cove. Thought maybe it was some boat had caught fire: but it wasn't his business, he said, so he turned over and went to sleep again.

"Well, gentlemen, Harry Bean thinks this story over that night and he puts two and two together and the next morning—that's yesterday—he decides to pass it on to Constable Harker. Harker acted very promptly. He communicated with us, and on our instructions found this Penny and pulled him in. I questioned Penny, and some further interesting facts were divulged. It'd be simplest if I read out the interview as taken down verbatim by Constable Oak."

The superintendent took up a sheet of paper, cleared his throat remorselessly, and read:

"Q.—Name?

"A.—Ezekiel Penny.

"Q.—Address?

"A.—God's great open spaces.

"Q.—No fixed habitation. Will you describe in your own words what happened on Thursday night?

"A.—I had been walking from Poolhampton. Very nice little town. Salubrious resort——

"Q.—Keep to the point please.

"A.—O.K., General. As the shades of night fell, I found myself on the Basket Down you call it, don't you? I looks for a place to doss down, and I sees a ruined cottage a hundred yards off the track, to my left. So I takes up occupation of same and has a bit of shut-eye. After a while I wakes up——

"Q.—What time would that be?

"A.—Unfortunately I'd mislaid my gold bleeding wristwatch, so I can't tell you exactly. Was still dark. Maybe two o'clock in the morning. Maybe three. Well, I wakes up——

"Q.—Any particular reason? Some sound wake you up?

"A.—Ah! What it is to have a brain! I'd forgotten all about it. That's right, General: must've been that perishing motor-bike what woke me up.

"Q.—Motor-bike?

"A.—Yes. I heard the sound of a motor-bike receding inland. Must've passed along into the lane that leads to the main road up along.

"Q.—Did it sound like a powerful engine?

"A.—Couldn't say, General. I was never in the motor trade. Must've been pretty asterisk powerful to wake me up.

"Q.—What happened then?

"A.—I gets up and goes to the door of my temporary mansion, and I has a bit of a look around and I sees a sort of glow in the sky, just about where this Basket Cove would be. So I says to myself, 'Something's on fire over there,' and I lies down and goes to sleep again.

"Q.—You did nothing about it? Why didn't you report this?

"A.—I ain't a ruddy fire brigade, am I? And there wasn't a telephone in this here cottage. Nor I don't carry a portable wireless about with me.

"Q.—That's enough. You saw no suspicious person that night, while you were walking over the downs? Heard nothing apart from the motor-bicycle?

"A.—Not a soul, General. I was monarch of all I bleeding well surveyed."

"That," said Superintendent Flaxenham, with a subdued twinkle in his eye, "was all we could get out of Ezekiel Penny."

"It's queer, isn't it, nobody else seeing anything of this fire," said Tyler. "Weren't there any campers about?"

"That's just it. As I hinted before, this particular part of Basket Down is specially deserted just now. You see, the Air Ministry has bought it for bombing practice."

"Ah!" murmured Nigel, *"Solitudinem faciunt; pacem appellant."*

"Well, gentlemen, on receiving this information, we made further investigations. The upshot of which was the discovery yesterday evening of a sunken wreck lying near the mouth of the cove. We're having it raised and beached now, and I'll lay long odds on it's being the boat you're looking for. We'll go over there at once, if it suits you. I've got hold of Elias Faulkes, the man who looked after *The Gannet,* and he'll come with us. No news of Mr. Joseph Bunnett your end?"

"We've not found him yet. We've heard from him all right though," said the inspector morosely. He gave Flaxenham a brief account of their discovery in Joe's house.

"Well, now! He must be a tough customer!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Bad, that: very bad: dear, dear, dear. And I was thinking we should find Mr. Bunnett and Bloxam on *The Gannet.*"

"What's this?" asked Nigel sharply. "Bloxam?"

"Ay. The man he took with him. Fisherman here—or used to when there was some fishing. Took him on board at the last moment."

"Forgot to tell you, Mr. Strangeways," said Tyler.

"But damn it, this alters the whole complexion of the case. Don't you see——"

"Doesn't alter my theory of the crime, sir. All fits in perfectly," replied the inspector in his most irritatingly superior manner.

"Oh, you have a theory, have you? And when does the unveiling ceremony take place?"

"Wait till I've had a look at *The Gannet,* sir."

"Hmm. Well, I hope your theory explains the two extraordinary and blatant contradictions that this cruise of Bunnett's presents us with."

"Contradictions, eh?" said Tyler, trying to look as though he knew all about it. "Yes, contradictions. And what would *you* say the contradictions were, sir?"

"Ha! Trying to pump me! Well, then, here you are. First we know Joe Bunnett was a hardened shellback; had no use for engines; born with a sheet in his mouth."

"You hold the sheet in your hand, sir," said Flaxenham, "not your mouth."

"Of course. Stupid of me. Well, here's this fellow, a devotee of sail, suddenly for no apparent reason installing an auxiliary engine in his boat. Contradiction number one."

"But we were told that he did this because he felt he was getting beyond sailing the boat single-handed."

"Exactly. But if the reason for installing the engine was that he should be able to run the boat single-handed, why did he then take on a paid hand at the last minute? Contradiction number two."

Inspector Tyler scratched his chin meditatively. "Ah. Clever of you seeing that, sir. But I think—yes, it all fits in. It doesn't invalidate my theory."

"The sphinx of Maiden Astbury, on being questioned, declared that he had nothing to say. The oracles are dumb, no voice nor hideous hum runs through the arched roof in words deceiving. Except perhaps, the hideous hum of a motor-bike."

"Yes," said Tyler. "The motor-bike. That just about proves it, I think."

"Well, if you gentlemen have finished telling riddles, we'd best be getting along," Flaxenham said slowly.

Elias Faulkes, a bronzed, taciturn man, was introduced to them, and the four bundled into a police car and set off. On their way to Basket Cove, Tyler plied Faulkes with questions. This auxiliary engine, now—when had Mr. Bunnett decided to install it? Faulkes did not know when he had *decided;* all he knew was that Bunnett had advised him of his intention about three weeks ago and had come down to supervise the fitting of the engine shortly afterwards. Faulkes himself knew a fair bit about marine engines and had lent a hand. Tyler appeared to be very interested by this. He asked for the exact date when the engine was installed. The third and fourth of July. Had Joe stayed in town on the night of the third or returned to Maiden Astbury? Stayed: the same hotel as usual. What sort of a man was this Bloxam? Reliable? He was all right: a good fisherman: a bit lazy. Was he accustomed to marine engines? No. But anyone could pick up the hang of them things in ten minutes. Why had Mr. Bunnett chosen him, and why had he left it so late to engage him? Faulkes didn't know why it had been left so late; but Mr. Bunnett could always be pretty sure of getting Bloxam to sail with him, because Bloxam made a living now hiring out rowing boats to visitors, and his lad, Bert, could do that while he himself was away earning good extra money on *The Gannet;* besides, Bloxam would do anything for Mr. Bunnett—Bunnett had rescued young Bert from drowning a few years ago when his sailing-dinghy had capsized in a squall.

"Dinghy!" exclaimed Nigel, awaking apparently out of a deep slumber. "Where's *The Gannet*'s dinghy? Joe must have had one, didn't he?"

"He had one in tow when he started, he did all right," affirmed Elias Faulkes.

"I've no information about any dinghy," said Flaxenham.

"Well, if that *is The Gannet* sunk in the cove, the dinghy must be somewhere about. There'd be no point in Bunnett swimming ashore."

Nigel looked questioningly at Elias Faulkes, but the man remained silent as a bronze image.

"Smugglers!" Nigel said, after a short and frenzied groping in his memory. "Basket Cove was used by smugglers. Maybe there is a cave there?"

"There might be," replied Faulkes cautiously. Then, turning his head and gazing at Nigel as though he was a ship hull-down on the horizon, "But what'd he go for to put his dinghy in a cave, mister? It isn't sense."

In a little over thirty minutes they turned off the Poolhampton-

Bridmouth road into a lane whose off-shoots seemed to multiply and run riot like bindweed. Approached the sea thus deviously, the lane soon degenerated into a rough track climbing on to the bleak solitude of Basket Down. They passed a number of notices warning in official language whomsoever it might concern that this land was the property of the Air Ministry and trespassers would only have themselves to blame if they got their heads blown off. The tang of salt and thyme was in the air, and the ghostly cries of gulls. Bright sunlight turned the cliff-faces to an almost dazzling gold on either side of the cove; the water was green as crême de menthe. The track along which they had been driving became a bridle-path, trodden once no doubt by the ponies of smugglers, leading down the cliff in great loops. On the little sandy beach at its foot a blackened hulk was resting, guarded by two policemen. The salvage gang was there, too, and several small boys who had sprung up in their mushroom manner as it were out of the ground. A number of sightseers sprawled along the top of the cliff, throwing banana-skins and cartons negligently down into the cove. Someone was playing "I'm in heaven" on a mouth organ; the last perfect touch of the macabre, Nigel reflected, that the scene demanded.

The task of salvage, it appeared, had been unusually easy because of the sandy bottom of the cove. Divers had gone down and fastened grapnels to the wreck, which had then been dragged in by powerful winches set up on the shore. *The Gannet* was a melancholy sight now, lying wearily over on one side, her hull charred, her upper-works black and blistered, the engine a tortured corpse of metal.

"Gives you a shock, doesn't it?" Flaxenham said rather unexpectedly to Nigel. "Like human beings, boats are. All alive and kicking when they're on the water, and now she looks like a dead body. A cruel shame it is."

"Mr. Bunnett was real fond of her," said Faulkes, staring at *The Gannet* with those long-distance eyes of his.

The foreman of the gang came up to them, and said:

"There's a stiff in the cabin, sir."

The sound of the mouth organ floated down to them, like the fluting of an irresponsible cherub—

"I went to sea to see the sea——"

Nigel felt an almost irresistible impulse to burst into tears.

The smell of charred wood and burned metal lay heavy on the summer air. Well, there was no use getting worked up about it. *The Gannet* had been burned alive and there was a stiff in the cabin. Let Tyler see to it.

Already the inspector was clambering up the boat's sloping side. A timeless silence, a hush only emphasised by the hushed and rhythmic plashing of the waves. The mouth-organ player was silent. The knot of men stood about silently, as if waiting for a funeral. After what seemed a very long time the inspector reappeared and beckoned to Elias Faulkes: the two of them went into the cabin. Another long pause. The small boys began to get restive and started clambering over the rocks on the western side of the cove.

Inspector Tyler was standing on the deck, bending down to Flaxenham. He looked oddly like an actor on the stage conferring with the producer during a rehearsal, Nigel thought. He could hear him say quietly:

"Bloxam is there. Burnt to death. Not much left of him. Faulkes recognises his ear-rings, and he's got one of those bracelets with his name on it. Looks as if the fire started in there—paraffin lamp all buckled up. We'll have to get an expert in on this, sir."

"I've sent for one. Expecting him along any time. Shall we get the body out now?"

Nigel wandered away. He felt dazed. So many questions to find an answer to. It all seemed trivial, compared with the fact of Miss Mellors dead and Bloxam dead—two people who had done no one any great harm, killed because they didn't fit in somehow with a murderer's plans. Or was that true of Bloxam? No reason why the fire on *The Gannet* should not have been accidental. A murderer would not want to set fire to his alibi, after all. After two murders one was apt to get morbidly suspicious.

"Hoy, mister, there's a boot in yurr!"

Nigel looked up, startled. The voice appeared to proceed, like an oracle, out of solid rock. Then, staring in its direction, he saw a boy's head growing—it seemed—from a heap of sea weed. Approaching nearer, he perceived that the piled-up drift half concealed the entrance of a cave at the foot of the cliff.

"A boot?" he said, somewhat bemused. "A football-boot, sea-boot, elastic-sided boot, surgical boot, or what?"

"Naw, mister, a boot."

This conversation was evidently not going to get Nigel much further, so he bent his head, entered the narrow opening and found himself in a cave whose floor sloped upwards and whose roof was invisible. Inside the cave was another small boy jumping excitedly up and down on the seat of the "boot." It was *The Gannet*'s dinghy. Another piece of the puzzle fitted into its place.

"Give over, Buffy!" yelled the first small boy, "yurr's one of the gents come aafter they smugglers."

The dancing one gave over, and Nigel fixed with an unrelenting stare.

"What smugglers?" asked Nigel.

"The smugglers as came in that thurr boot."

"But they—it wasn't a smuggler."

"Gourrn! 'Course they was. What'd they be doing in the Smugglers' Cave else? What'd they pile the drift against the mouth of the cave for, like Gran says her father toold her the smugglers used to do, if they wurrn't?"

Nigel had an inspiration. He addressed the boy gravely.

"Well, it mightn't have been a smuggler. In fact—can you keep a secret?"

"Slit my throat!"

"Maybe he will if you don't," Nigel said, with blood-curdling emphasis on the *"he."* The boy received this with keen relish. Nigel went on, "Now here's this smuggler. He comes ashore with the stuff. It's not hidden in here, is it? No. Very well. He must have taken it inland. Now, how did he do that? Had he a car or a motor-bike waiting for him? We're pretty sure he had no accomplice on land—which means there must have been a motor-bike hidden somewhere up on the cliff ready for him to ride off on. Do you know anywhere a motor-bike could be hidden, near here?"

"Ah, that's right," said the boy. "He'd have a motor-bike hidden. No, he wouldn't, though; he'd have a faast airyplane with a hollow propellor for to hide the jewels inside—or was it drugs, mister? Seen that on the flicks, I have."

"He might have had a fast aeroplane," rejoined Nigel with admirable patience: "or he might have had the Graf Zeppelin. But, as it happens, he didn't. It was a motor-bike. The question is, where was it hidden?"

"Hey, mister!" Buffy suddenly uncorked himself and yelled into Nigel's face. "Hey, mister! What about that motor-bike Fred seen laast week in th' shed up along?"

"Now you're talking. That might be it. Tell me all about it. What day was it, first?"

"Sunday before laast. Fred and Curly here and me comes up yurr, and me and Curly dares 'ee to go into that shed thurr the airyplanes be going to bomb. Fred, 'ee can't read, see, 'ee's daaft, see, so 'ee don't rightlee know this shed's a taarget for the airyplanes. So Fred 'ee creeps along on belly towards shed, and thurr was me and Curly fair splitting laarfing, see, 'cos we'm waiting for they airyplanes to come along and blow old Fred to bloody bits, see. Reckon 'ee had the laarf on us though, mister, 'cos they airyplanes never come aafter all," Buffy added with some chagrin.

"Too bad," said Nigel sympathetically. "What happened then?"

"Well, Fred, 'ee goes into shed and 'ee finds a motor-bike hidden beneath a crop of nettles and that. 'Ee beckons to we and aafter a bit us runs into shed and sees un, too. A Rudge motor-bike it wurr."

"A new one?"

"No. Reg'lar battered old thing."

"You didn't tell anyone about it?"

"No fear, mister. Dad 'ee'd take the skin off Curly and me if 'ee'd knowd we'd been in thurr, and Fred 'ee's daaft, see, 'ee caan't speak properlee, only bumble like."

"Notice the number plate on the bike?"

"No, mister."

By dint of distributing largesse and sinister threats in equal proportion, Nigel induced the boys to repeat their tale to Tyler. The shed was visited —it was a bare two hundred yards from the top of the cliff, lying in a fold of the down. Oil spots were discovered amongst the nettles and rubble where the motor-bicycle had lain. When the place had been thoroughly searched, without further result, they descended to the cove again. Nigel commented that it was a risky business for Bunnett to leave a bike in that shed for several days; if anyone had noticed it there, it would have been reported to the police in the course of their investigations, and the purchase of the bike might easily have been traced back to Joe. Anyhow, how could he know that the shed wouldn't be bombed in the interval. The local constable then volunteered that none of the people in the district would go near this shed because a labourer had hung himself in it a few years back; and visitors would be kept off by the Air Ministry notices. Flaxenham said that, as far as the bombing went, anyone could find out by a few tactful inquiries when bombing operations were due to commence. Tyler said there was very little danger of the bike being traced to Bunnett: he would presumably purchase it by some roundabout method, and remove all marks of identification from it; when he had finished with it, he had intended no doubt to take it aboard and pitch it off the boat into deep water.

Tyler's theory of the crime was now fairly clear to Nigel. However, they had no leisure to discuss it yet. There was the dinghy to be examined: a number of fingerprints were discovered on it and on the oars; the prints of the two boys were taken, much to their delight. The expert, Mr. Crankshaw, had by now arrived and was making his examination of *The Gannet.* He promised to telephone his report to Tyler as soon as the job was finished. He would not commit himself yet as to the origin of the fire. It was possible that it had started in the cabin, the result—say—of some carelessness by Bloxam in filling the paraffin lamp. Asked by Tyler whether it was possible for the lamp to have been upset by Bloxam getting out of his bunk in a sleepy, half-drugged state, Mr. Crankshaw replied that it was most unlikely; the lamp was swung from the cabin roof and designed to stand rough treatment. On the other hand, there was certain evidence to suggest that the fire, or another fire, had originated in or near the engine. This again could only be the result of carelessness or deliberate incendiarism; more minute examination might enable him to judge whether it was the former or the latter. Generally speaking, he would vote for deliberate incendiarism; but petrol-engines were notoriously tricky things in careless or inexperienced hands.

The inspector was in a hurry to get back to Maiden Astbury. Superintendent Flaxenham agreed to undertake the routine inquiries on the spot; to trace Joe Bunnett's movements on his previous visit to supervise the installing of the engine, to find out whether he had been seen at any time in the vicinity of Basket Cove, to inquire locally into the sales of second-hand Rudges, and so on. Tyler and Flaxenham put their heads together over the map and worked out the quickest route between the cove and Maiden Astbury; inquiries would be made all along this route to discover if anyone had heard a motor-bike passing north on the night of the murder or returning south before dawn. Allowing for the meanderings of the lane near the coast, they calculated that the route could be little over twenty miles. Tyler would check it by his speedometer on his return journey.

The police car started off. Tyler settled his huge bulk comfortably, turned to Nigel, and said:

"Now, sir. This is my case against Joe Bunnett"—

Chapter XIII

July 20, 7.30–9.17 p.m.

And when I think upon a pot of beer.
BYRON, *Don Juan*

Nigel was no subscriber to the theory that strong drink fuddles the intellect. Rather did he hold that, by taking off the censor and releasing the many subconscious influences which cloud, distort and inhibit the reason, strong drink gives the intellect free play and fair play. Thus it was not until seven-thirty that evening—the Cammisons had dined early and Nigel excused himself immediately after dinner—that he sat down alone to examine, aided by three bottles of beer, Inspector Tyler's theory of the crime. He poured out the first bottle into his tankard, balanced the tankard on his lap, lay back and shut his eyes.

Tyler's theory, he said to himself: let me first restate it. The criminal is Joe Bunnett. His motive for murdering Eustace was his life-long oppression at Eustace's hands, in particular his brother's forbidding of the banns with Ariadne Mellors; all this brought to a head by Eustace's intention to sell the brewery and thus throw his employees out of work. There may have been some other recent quarrel of which we have not heard, as well. That is reasonable enough motive. One may add, too, that Joe— humiliated by the way he had caved in to Eustace over Ariadne— was more or less consciously reasserting his manhood to her by killing Eustace; showing her in the most primitive, and therefore the most forceful way possible, that he was not the worm she and Eustace imagined him. Admittedly, it is on the face of it odd that he should have waited so many years to assert himself. But, as Herbert and Sophie have impressed upon me, Joe is a decent, ordinary fellow at heart—the sort that will contemplate violence only when it is justified by an altruistic motive, however deep the egoistic motives may be that in fact are drawing them towards this crisis of the will and explosion of violence.

Nigel took a deep draught, sighed and lit a cigarette. The motive, then, is more than adequate. Now for Tyler's reconstruction of the crime. According to him, Joe Bunnett prepared an almost perfect alibi, and an almost perfect crime, both of which failed through the interposition of Nemesis—or, as Tyler less classically puts it—damned bad luck. Joe had done a great deal of sailing off the Dorset coast. He knew the Basket Cove was a secluded spot, made doubly secluded recently by the purchase of the down behind it by the Air Ministry. Moreover, Joe was hail-fellow-well-met with all sorts of people; it would not be difficult for him to find out the periods when bombing practice would take place and the periods when he could leave the motor-bike in that shed with impunity. It is worth remarking that Basket Cove is almost the nearest point on the coast to Maiden Astbury. Up to this point—as far as he is concerned—every prospect pleases and only Eustace is vile.

Now the method of the crime. Roughly, Joe intends to lure his brother into the brewery with the bait of an anonymous letter. He intends to arrive at the brewery himself well before his brother, disconnect the emergency bell of the refrigerator-room and meet Eustace by the entrance of the brewery. At this point, either he will tell Eustace that he himself is here because of an anonymous letter he has received and in due course he will get him into the refrigerator-room; or he will stun Eustace at once in such a way that the injury may later look to have been sustained in the course of Eustace's struggles to get out of the room, and after stunning him will convey his body there. Joe's knowledge of the night-watchman's schedule would enable him to do all this with absolute certainty of not being discovered in the act.

The murder was meant to look like an accident. Probably, if all had gone as Joe planned, he would have tried to get hold of the anonymous letter he had sent to his brother and destroy it; if found by the police, the letter might give rise to suspicion that the accident was not all it seemed. Accident, then, was to be Joe's first line of defence. But, in case that failed, he prepared an alibi; not too perfect or elaborate an alibi; just a nice, reasonable one. He had an auxiliary engine installed on *The Gannet.* For two obvious reasons. You cannot rely on steady winds in the middle of summer; it was essential that Joe should arrive at Basket Cove on schedule—in plenty of time to be able to climb the cliff, pick up his hidden motor-bike and get to Maiden Astbury by 11.30 p.m. at the latest. It was equally essential that, on his return to *The Gannet,* he should not find himself becalmed; he planned, no doubt, to put in at Lyme Regis, or whatever was to be his next port of call, at such an hour that he might reasonably seem to have been sailing all night.

How does Bloxam fit in with all this? On the whole I am inclined to agree with Tyler that Joe's taking-on of Bloxam was a last-minute strengthening of his alibi, and not a part of the original plan. Tyler's theory, sound enough surely, is that Joe told Bloxam he was going to stand the trick from 10 p.m., say, to 2 a.m. Before Bloxam turned in at 10 p.m., Joe prepared some coffee for them both, and put a sleeping powder into Bloxam's. While Bloxam was in a drugged slumber, Joe would change course, make all speed towards the land, creep into Basket Cove (*The Gannet* was equipped with a powerful acetylene headlight, Elias Faulkes had informed them), anchor, race to Maiden Astbury, shut Eustace in the refrigerator-room, race back, get rid of the motor-bike—probably by wheeling it down the bridle-path, taking it aboard and throwing it into deep water, and get *The Gannet* some way along on her original course before awakening Bloxam.

From the time *The Gannet* entered Basket Cove to the time she put out again there would be a minimum gap of two hours, Tyler calculated. Nigel took out the schedule of approximate times that Tyler had made up.

10 p.m. J.B. takes over wheel.
10.40 p.m. Anchors in Basket Cove; rows ashore; climbs cliff.
10.50 p.m. Sets off on motor-bike.
11.30 p.m. Arrives brewery; disconnects emergency bell; waits for Eustace.
Midnight. Meets Eustace near brewery entrance; gets him to refrigerator-room; shuts him in.
12.30 a.m. Rides out of Maiden Astbury.
1.10 a.m. Arrives on cliff above Basket Cove, wheels bike down bridle-path, puts it in dinghy, and weighs anchor by
1.20 a.m. *Gannet* puts out.
1.35 a.m. *Gannet* back on original course. J. B. throws motor-bike out of dinghy, and—
2.0 a.m. Awakens Bloxam.

How is that two hours to be accounted for to Bloxam? The man might easily notice, when it grew light, that *The Gannet* was not nearly as far on her course as she should be. Probable answer; *The Gannet* is proceeding under sail *only* during Bloxam's trick; Joe announces his intention of continuing under sail *only;* as soon as Bloxam is well asleep, Joe starts up the engine and uses the engine the whole time till just before he awakens Bloxam; this would make up most of the leeway, especially if the wind that night was light—as indeed it turned out to be. Bloxam, indirectly, would be able to confirm that the engine had not been used, for the unexpected sound and vibration of it would have awoken him out of any ordinary sleep, and he could have no reason to suppose that he had been drugged. In short, Joe had a witness who would be prepared to swear that he was sailing all night, and thus give him an excellent alibi for the crime—the more excellent for being apparently natural and not in the least elaborate.

It is quite possible, though we shall probably never have proof of it, that Joe strengthened this alibi by a little juggling with the petrol supply. It would be easy for him, just before he woke Bloxam, to fill up the tank from a tin he had secreted somewhere on the boat—or better, had previously hidden somewhere on shore, in the cave for instance, and only brought aboard on his return from Maiden Astbury. He could then sink this tin, and call Bloxam's attention later in some unobtrusive way to the fact that the tank was full. Thus, there would be apparently incontrovertible evidence that the engine had not been used at all that night.

One further point worth noticing. Joe had saved Bloxam's son from drowning. If the worst came to the worst, and the alibi started to leak, Bloxam would probably perjure himself black and blue for Joe. On the other hand, it would perhaps have been more sensible of Joe to take aboard a man whom the police could not possibly suspect of collusion with him.

Nigel took another deep draught and lit his second cigarette.

Now for what really happened. Everything went according to Cocker until he got to the brewery. (It seems reasonable to suppose that, if Eustace failed to be lured to the brewery by the anonymous letter, Joe had some alternative plan of getting into his house, waking him and bringing him there. He could bank pretty confidently, though, on Eustace's passion for catching out his employees in petty derelictions.) We now come to the central problem of the case—why was not the murder carried out as originally planned? Tyler reconstructs it as follows. *Either* there was a struggle when the pair entered the refrigerator-room, and some mark was left on Eustace which necessitated the destruction of his body; *or* Joe stunned Eustace near the entrance, but did not stun him hard enough (through fear of leaving a suspicious wound), and Eustace recovered consciousness when Joe was carrying him into the refrigerator-room; a struggle took place, etc. The fragment of ring I discovered leaves pretty well no doubt that a struggle of some kind did take place.

For some reason, not yet demonstrable, the accident-plan goes wrong and Joe puts his brother into the copper. The idea that it was because of a wound inflicted by a left-handed person must be washed out; Herbert says that the blow which killed Miss Mellors was a right-handed one, and two murderers is more than one can stomach. Well now, according to Tyler, Joe put his brother in the copper and started back for Basket Cove. He was the man, probably, whom Gabriel Sorn heard riding away from the brewery on a motor-bike between 12.30 and 12.45.

Nigel jerked himself up straight, spilling some beer on his trousers.

Stop! Isn't there a discrepancy there? Sorn said he heard the motor-bike on his way home. From the brewery to his digs is about five minutes' walk. He got in at twelve-forty-five. Therefore he heard the cyclist at twelve-forty. Now, Eustace was due at the brewery at midnight. Speed was necessary to Joe's plan—he had to return to Basket Cove as quickly as possible, soon after one o'clock, if he was to get *The Gannet* back on her course by the time Bloxam was due to relieve him. That being so, why did he spend forty minutes in the brewery? Even allowing for a certain amount of delay in getting Eustace where he wanted him, and then in transferring the body to the copper, forty minutes seems an unconscionable time to have hung about. One can scarcely credit that, in the heat of the moment, he would notice that a piece had been chipped off his signet-ring and spend valuable time hunting for it. Yet what other explanation can there be?

Leave that aside. Joe returns to *The Gannet* and finds it in flames. That is the key of Tyler's case; it is the only theory by which he can explain Joe's extraordinary subsequent actions. Nemesis steps in and puts a match to Joe's alibi. What a headline it would make for the press! What a succulent text for the pulpit! What a subject for morbid clichés in suburban parlours. But is it true? Isn't it much, much too good to be true? Tyler's suggestion is that Bloxam, through waking up half-stupid from a drugged sleep, and/or through carelessness, and/or through his lack of experience with petrol engines, set the boat on fire. Of course, we can't say anything very positive about that till we receive the expert's report. But there are two minor, and one major negative point. The minor points are:—(i) if Bloxam started the fire, one would have expected him to have jumped overboard, not gone into the cabin where his body was found; (ii) even if he had not gone overboard at once, but fought the fire and got his clothes caught he would still naturally have jumped into the water then. By Jove though, there are two possible explanations for that. The fire-extinguisher was in the cabin; whether the fire started near the engine or in the cabin, Bloxam would go for the extinguisher, and he may quite possibly have been overcome before he could use it. Alternatively, he may have jumped overboard; Joe may then have found his body in the water and put it back into the cabin—in order that the body might be more completely burnt and thus there should be no danger of a post-mortem revealing that he had been drugged.

Both those, in our present state of ignorance about the source of the fire, are reasonable theories. But they both break down on my major negative point, which is this: the kingpin of Joe's plan was that Bloxam should be asleep while *The Gannet* was in Basket Cove. His alibi would be blown up with all hands if Bloxam should awake, find the boat lying in the cove and his employer disappeared. Therefore, the very last mistake Joe would be likely to make would be to give Bloxam an insufficient amount of the drug. Unless Bloxam had a freak resistance to whatever drug was administered, he could not possibly have woken up so soon, and therefore he could not have accidentally set the boat on fire. Therefore, the only solutions left are either that the boat caught fire of itself, or that some third party—neither Joe nor Bloxam—set it on fire deliberately.

"Eliminate the impossible; and whatever is left will be the truth." That's all very jolly; but I am faced with a whole set of impossibles. I'll have to pass that over for the present. Proceed with Tyler's reconstruction. Joe finds his alibi shot to pieces. He hides the dinghy in the cave, piling seaweed and drift against the cave-mouth; the idea being to conceal for as long as possible the whereabouts of *The Gannet* and so give him more time for escape. That fits the facts reasonably enough. He then puts his head in his hands and does a bit of thinking. This is to account for the time between his arrival at the cave—not later than one-thirty, and the time the tramp heard the motor-bike "receding inland," two or maybe three o'clock. Admittedly the tramp hadn't a watch; but these fellows develop a pretty accurate sense of time. Joe decided on the audacious stroke of hiding up for a day or two in his own house while destroying the evidence against him and getting hold of his passport.

He gets back to Maiden Astbury somewhere around three o'clock, probably dumping his motor-bike somewhere outside the town; Honeycombe Wood would be a good place for concealing it; I wonder have the police searched it yet. He goes to ground in the attic. It is too late to get his passport from the brewery, for dawn will soon be breaking; anyway, he's had all the excitement his nerves can stand for one night. The next night, Friday, he lies low; he knows that Bunnett's body will only have been found that evening, and the brewery will be swarming with police. On Saturday night he makes his first move; he lets himself into Eustace's house with the duplicate keys he took off the body, removes the incriminating Roxby's papers, and—a point the inspector has overlooked—stole some food.

On Sunday morning, so Tollworthy told me, Mrs. Bunnett was in a tantrum because her maid—so she said—had eaten a cake and two loaves that had been baked the day before. Why did no one notice that point? Maids may steal a slice or two of cake from time to time; but they most certainly do *not* polish off a whole baking. This incidentally accounts for the crumbs in the attic.

Why did not Joe enter the brewery the same night and get hold of his passport? According to Tyler, because he was afraid the police might still be poking about in the brewery. That is plausible; but Tyler's theory at this point throws up several difficulties. First, if Joe intended to flee the country, thus inevitably drawing suspicion upon himself, why did he bother to destroy the evidence of the Roxby's transaction? Second, was the destruction of *The Gannet* so disastrous that the only course open to him was this foolhardy one of returning to Maiden Astbury, getting his passport, going abroad and starting life all over again? Surely the sensible thing to have done, when he found *The Gannet* in flames, was to have rowed the motor-bike out to deep water and dumped it, and then walked over Basket Down till he found a farmhouse. He could surely make up some plausible story to account for his having to put in at the Cove, the outbreak of the fire, and the death of Bloxam. Provided the bike had originally been obtained—as no doubt it had—in another part of the country and in such a way that the purchase could not be connected with him, and provided it was sunk deep, there was simply nothing to connect him with the murder. Still one must admit that murderers are apt to lose their heads, especially Joe's type; the natural impulse of his sort would be to run to mother when in trouble, and his return to Maiden Astbury can be explained by his desire to get in touch with Ariadne Mellors, whose relationship with him was clearly semi-maternal. The first objection, too, is not insuperable. It can be argued that he destroyed the Roxby's papers in order to give himself time; the longer the police believed that he was still cruising about on *The Gannet* , and the longer they had nothing like those papers to suggest his own motive for the crime, the longer it would be before they instituted a serious search for him. No doubt he had some bad moments on Saturday, when he heard them below examining his study and bedroom. But, when the search proceeded no further, he would assume that he was not yet suspected and could postpone going for his passport till a later night—when, with any luck, the brewery would be comparatively free of police.

Then, according to Tyler, Joe's hand was forced. On Sunday, about midnight, he was surprised in his study by an intruder; he struck out in panic, struck out again and again in the dark; then, all too late, found that he had killed the one person he could have trusted to back him through thick and thin. It was now imperative for him to clear out of the country at once, before the body was discovered. So he went over to the brewery after his passport, but was baulked by the night-watchman. Here again Tyler's theory fits the facts well enough; yet it doesn't seem to fit all the implications. For instance, is it conceivable that Joe could have struck down Miss Mellors? If she surprised him in the study, surely she would recognise and speak to him before he had time to deliver a blow; she had an electric torch, after all. If, on the other hand, he had heard someone moving about in the study, the natural thing would have been for him to sit tight in the attic; if there had been anything incriminating in the study, the police would have found it the day before. Finally, if it was Joe who visited the brewery on Sunday night, *where is he now?*

Arrived at this crux, Nigel swallowed the rest of his beer, walked slowly several times round the room, opened his second bottle, and sat down again.

Where is Joe Bunnett now? It is almost incredible, with the whole county police searching for him and considering how well known he is round here, that he has not been found. There seem two possible explanations. He is still in the brewery; there are probably a number of hiding places there that he would know of and the police would not guess. Alternatively, he may be dead. This fits best the uneasy conviction I've had all along that some unknown person has been trying to frame Joe. Let us predicate this X and see what follows. It follows, surely, that X was in collusion with Joe over the murder of Eustace. Otherwise one would have to suppose that he happened to surprise Joe while he was killing Eustace, or immediately afterwards; but, if X was a bad lot, the result of this would be blackmail—the last thing X would want would be for anyone else to suspect Joe, and therefore he would not go around planting incriminating evidence against him. Alternatively, if X was the sole murderer, how on earth—without making Joe suspicious of him—could he arrange that Joe should put into Basket Cove that night and behave generally in such a dubious manner? And how did the burning of *The Gannet* fit in?

Suppose, then, that X and Joe are in collusion. Does that give me a line on X? There's no doubt that the people Joe would reasonably collude with are—in order of preference—Miss Mellors, Herbert Cammison, Gabriel Sorn, and Mr. Barnes. Cross out Miss Mellors. True, she was with Joe when he or she probably posted the anonymous letter; she might even have entered Joe's house to plant incriminating evidence against him, and been killed by him because he realised she was double-crossing him. But she is dead, and therefore it cannot be she who got rid of Joe. Anyway, she was surely too fond of Joe to double-cross him. Herbert Cammison? He and Joe were friends: they were the two people who had the strongest motives for killing Bunnett. How would it have worked out. Herbert would probably be the brain behind the whole plan. Also, he would post the anonymous letter. We know he was in the vicinity of Weston Priors that afternoon. Difficulty here, why hasn't Joe a better alibi for the posting of the letter? Answer: he probably had, and would have come out with it if asked by the police, only the burning of *The Gannet* upset the whole plan. Well then, Joe had the obvious alibi for the night of the murder; therefore it was he who did the actual killing.

Suppose all this is true, subsequent events admit of two different interpretations. *(a)* Herbert had planned all along to double-cross Joe. He went down to Basket Cove that night, presumably on a motor-bike, possibly stopping Joe outside the town and riding pillion on his: knocked Joe on the head and disposed of his body somehow; set fire to the yacht; and he has since been dealing out this incriminating evidence against Joe; *(b)* Herbert had no intention of double-crossing his accomplice. Joe, finding the yacht burnt, returns to Maiden Astbury gibbering with panic and somehow gets in touch with Herbert. Herbert realises Joe's nerve has cracked; Joe may give the show away any minute and implicate Herbert. Therefore, Joe must be silenced. He kills Joe and disposes of the body—how, I do not yet know. How much of the evidence against Joe is genuine, so to speak, and how much Herbert faked, is for the moment irrelevant. This second interpretation is the more reasonable one in every way except that it assumes the fire in *The Gannet* to have been accidental. I don't believe Herbert is a villain; he would not have planned from the beginning to double-cross Joe; he is, on the other hand, a bit cold-blooded and ruthless; once he realised that his accomplice was breaking under the strain, he would be quite capable of sacrificing him. Herbert has a clear-headed idea of his own value to the world confused by no false modesty. He might easily say, in his dispassionate way, "The killing of Eustace was justified on social grounds; he was an enemy of society. Joe must be silenced now, too, because he is a danger to me and I am a valuable member of society."

There is no doubt that Herbert is the most likely candidate for the position of Joe's accomplice. He had both a social and a personal motive for getting rid of Eustace; he has an excellent brain and nerve; he is quite uncompromising; he might, under certain circumstances, be the most dangerous type of fanatic—the cool-headed one. At the same time, one must not pass over Gabriel Sorn or Mr. Barnes as possible accomplices. Gabriel was not, as far as I know, a close friend of Joe's. But he had those two very strong motives for killing Eustace—the money he would inherit (if indeed he knew about that), and his neurotic feelings towards Eustace as his father. The weak point about him or Mr. Barnes is that neither of them were in such a favourable position as Cammison to dispose of Joe's body. A doctor is expert at dissecting bodies; a doctor goes off on his rounds in the country, and has much more opportunity of getting rid of the remains than men who are pegged down all day in a brewery.

Nigel felt acutely uncomfortable about all this. He liked Herbert and he liked Sophie. In fact, he had only decided to stay on and help in the case because they seemed in obvious need of his help. Herbert had been absolutely open about his motives; moreover, Nigel had seen him examining the bodies of Eustace Bunnett and Miss Mellors; it was incredible that he should not have turned a hair, if he was responsible for the murder of them both, directly or indirectly. Alas, not quite incredible. Herbert was a man of steel, no getting away from it. However, might there not be some theory which would fit the facts and leave Herbert out of it?

Nigel took a deep breath, drained his tankard and poured out the third bottle—a signal, as it were, that the third phase of his battle of wits against this invisible enemy was beginning. He lay back in his chair, threw his long legs over the arm, and started a meticulous review of the case up to date.

The characters of the persons involved came first beneath his trained scrutiny. Then the events and material clues. Finally he exercised his astonishing verbal memory to recall everything he had heard said since his arrival in Maiden Astbury—not the evidence only, but also—and more important now—the apparently irrelevant remarks let drop from time to time. It was while he was engaged on this that the point came into his head which soon enabled him to work out a whole theory of the crime. It was a little remark made by Sophie Cammison, a remark of such seemingly grotesque irrelevance that there could be no possible excuse for lingering on it. Yet it teased him. It was like a small urchin making a long nose at the Nelson Column—absurdly impertinent, ludicrously disproportionate; yet somehow arresting. As Nigel rather irritably considered it, another point lit up in his mind, and then another. He jumped to his feet and began striding excitedly round the room. It was like watching those electric signs that light up letter by letter, gradually spelling out a name. And the name, Nigel knew as he watched with growing excitement these little points lighting up one by one—the name they unreeled was the name of the murderer.

He looked at his watch: 9.10 p.m. The question was, would the murderer put in another of his appearances tonight? The inspector was seeing to the brewery end of it all right; police would be watching from concealment every entrance; the murderer would be allowed to enter, but he would find it less easy to leave. If indeed, he wanted to enter; perhaps he was even now planning to strike somewhere else; perhaps his last visit to the brewery had only been a feint to conceal the direction of his next blow. Nigel stirred uneasily. It was an unpleasing thought that the next blow might be aimed at himself; the criminal was without mercy and had been a damned sight too efficient so far; maybe Nigel would be safest in the brewery to-night, with plenty of policemen on the spot. Oh, well, one could only die once. On with the dance.

Nigel went down to the hall telephone. There were two points still to be verified. He searched in the directory and dialled a number. Herbert Cammison, sitting in his study, heard him say—"Hallo. Is that Mr. Tripp? Oh, it's you speaking. This is Nigel Strangeways speaking from Dr. Cammison's. I'm helping the police in the Bunnett affair. . . . Yes. . . . Just one small point. That set of teeth you've been reconstructing. . . . Oh, you've finished . . . yes, it must have been a very delicate job. . . . Eustace Bunnett's, without any question? . . . Yes, I thought so. How did you identify them? . . . Of course, the plaster cast of the jaws: lucky you kept it . . . Joe's and Mrs. Bunnett's, too? Mm. You must have quite a nice little chamber of family horrors. No further identification necessary? . . . Quite so. Thanks very much. Good-night."

A faint look of perplexity appeared on Herbert Cammison's saturnine features. It deepened as he heard through the slightly open door another number being dialled and Nigel's voice saying, "Is Mrs. Bunnett in? . . . Thank you. . . . Mr. Strangeways speaking. Just a moment. Are you the——? . . . Oh, yes, Mrs. Bunnett's cook. Well, if you could just answer one or two questions, it would save troubling your mistress. . . . Yes, I am connected with the police. The night of the burglary, you remember; Saturday. Mrs. Bunnett said something about some food having disappeared. . . . Yes, of course, quite ridiculous. Some loaves and a seed-cake, wasn't it? . . . Yes, I expect the burglar took them, too. Hope he left you your Sunday joint. . . . He did. Oh well, it might have been worse, mightn't it? Thank you. Good-night."

As Nigel hung up the receiver, Dr. Cammison gently closed the door of his study. He stood quite still in the middle of the room, frowning a little. He was still standing there a minute later when the front-door bell rang. He went to the door. Gabriel Sorn was standing outside. "Could I see Strangeways for a minute," he said.

Chapter XIV

July 20, 9.20–11.20 p.m.

Thy chase had a beast in view.

DRYDEN

With Gabriel Sorn's arrival at the Cammisons', one may say that the last chapter of the Bunnett affair opened—the last chapter, for the murderer's confession can only be considered as an epilogue. This last chapter was a worthy climax to the events which had preceded, events so macabre, abominable and bewildering in themselves that one might well have supposed their conclusion could not fail to be anti-climax. This Monday night was distinguished for more than the catching of a cold-blooded and monstrously ingenious murderer. It was perhaps the first occasion on which a stolid policeman has nearly fainted, from something else than loss of blood; it was probably the first—and quite possibly the last—occasion on which Gabriel Sorn was to perform an act of indisputably the highest physical courage; and incidentally it came near to seeing the total destruction of Bunnett's brewery and of several estimable inhabitants of Maiden Astbury—not to mention Nigel himself.

At nine-twenty Gabriel Sorn, who had told Cammison that he wished to speak privately with Nigel, was shown by him into the bedroom. The young man, Nigel observed, was labouring under some strongly suppressed emotion; his left eyelid fluttered spasmodically with a nervous tic; the alternating prickliness and effusiveness of his manner were more strongly marked than before. He sat down in the basket-chair, clasping his hands so that the knuckles stood out white—as though nerving himself for a dentist's drill. Nigel, who at times could be as inhuman as Sophie had accused him of being, was far too interested in analysing Sorn's manner to feel pity or disgust for the rather lamentable figure he presented.

"Found your murderer yet?" said Sorn.

"The police, I understand, are confident of a speedy arrest," Nigel replied glibly.

"You 'understand'? That sounds as though you hadn't much confidence in them."

This remark was as good as a question; but Nigel made no answer. The best way to rattle anyone, he knew very well, was to remain silent, and compel the other chap to make the running. He stared non-committally down his nose. After ten seconds Sorn blurted out:

"But what about you? Haven't you any theory who the murderer is?"

"I have no theory," Nigel replied softly: then suddenly raising his pale blue eyes and staring fixedly at Sorn, he added.

"You see, I *know* who the murderer is."

Sorn's hands moved convulsively, a movement that he turned into a futile sort of gesture.

"You——? Oh, well. That's that, then, I suppose."

Nigel resumed his formidable silence.

"Well, damn it," jerked out Sorn after a little of this, "why haven't you arrested him?"

"I might not have enough evidence to convince the police. Or again, I might not know exactly where he is."

Gabriel Sorn digested this. Then, visibly screwing himself up to make the effort, he said—feigned negligence and real anxiety as it were cancelling each other out in his voice and rendering it quite toneless—

"May I ask, am *I* the murderer?"

"You should know best, Mr. Sorn, you should know best."

Gabriel gave a funny little laugh, a laugh of almost genuine amusement.

"Because, if I *am,* and if—as you more or less imply—you haven't yet passed on your knowledge to the police, then it would be to my advantage to plant a knife in your manly bosom as soon as possible. Wouldn't you say so?"

"Scarcely. After all, Cammison knows you're in my room—and so presumably does the maid. No, I should call it a decidedly imprudent move on your part."

"Cammison. Yes." Sorn lay back a little in his chair. "I've been thinking about my mother. She's proud, you know. Proud and poor. The blood of earls, so I've been credibly informed, runs in the Sorn veins—pretty diluted, of course, I'm wondering will she be too proud to take Eustace's money."

"Tough on you, if she refuses it."

"Yes. You see, it would enable me to give up the brewery and devote myself to writing. No doubt you think that would be a major calamity," he added defensively.

"Oh, no. Not a bit. I'd say you could write good poetry. You've had the right stimuli. 'We learn in suffering,' and all that."

"Thanks very much," snapped Sorn ungraciously. "I didn't come here for emotional reassurance."

"Just what did you come here for? A small point, perhaps, but one worth making. Apart from planting a knife in my manly bosom, I mean."

Gabriel Sorn was silent for some time. Then, without looking up, he said:

"I came to tell you a story. But I don't know that you'll believe it."

"You can but try."

"I suppose this facetious manner is part of your stock-in-trade. Oh well, I will try then. It's quite a short story. Half an hour ago I was rung up by a certain person who asked me to be waiting with my car at midnight in that lane that leads through Honeycombe Wood into the London Road."

Nigel slapped his knee excitedly. "The devil you were!" he exclaimed. "Here, let's get this straight. What you mean is that the murderer asked you to help him make a get-away?"

"You've said it."

"And why should he appeal to you particularly? I mean, you're putting yourself in rather an awkward position by this statement. It sounds as if you had been his accomplice all along."

"Do you really think I'd be giving myself and him away like this, if I was his accomplice?" Sorn asked wearily.

"Well, why *are* you giving him away? Have you developed a sudden passion for bourgeois morality, *fiat Justitia,* and all that?"

"It doesn't matter much what we call it, does it? I suppose it's just that I don't fancy the idea of my father's murderer getting off scot-free."

"Very filial of you, to be sure."

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up this schoolmaster's sarcasm!" Sorn burst out. "Even bastards have feelings."

"Well, I'm sorry, but it really is rather a tall story."

"You don't believe me?"

"Oh, yes. *I* believe you," Nigel said unexpectedly, "but I doubt if Tyler will. Can't you supply any—er—additional confirmation? The name of the person who rang you up, for instance?"

"You say you know who the murderer is. Why should I tell you what you know already? I don't mind telling you, though, where he rang up from: the A.A. box at the crossroads at the top of Honeycombe Hill. He's been hiding in the woods since last night."

"He told you all this? Trusting sort of fellow, isn't he?"

Sorn stared at the carpet. "You needn't pile it on. I know I'm behaving like Judas. He's—he was a friend of mine, you see, and he trusts me. But he shouldn't have killed my father," he added in odd, childish, obstinate tones. He twisted his fingers together. "God! I hope I am doing right to tell you this. Is it right of me, or just contemptible?"

"Don't ask me. I'm an amateur detective, not a judge."

"Well," said Sorn, trying to recover himself, "what is the amateur detective going to do about it?"

"I'll convince Tyler somehow. We'll throw a cordon round the wood; you will keep the rendezvous in your car, and we'll have a bobby or two hidden in the back of it. That suit you?"

Sorn's face flushed; his voice rose up and broke into a falsetto. "No I'll not—damn it, you can't expect me to be there when he's caught. That's asking a bit too much. You can borrow my car, if you like, but count me out of it."

"Very well, then. I'll go along and tell Tyler at once. He'll need to get all the men he can spare round the wood. Here's a map. Just show me the exact place where you're supposed to be meeting our friend. . . . Right, and where do you keep your car? Tollworthy will probably be coming along for it."

"It's standing outside my digs."

Gabriel Sorn was dismissed. In five minutes' time Nigel was talking to Tyler in the police station. The inspector was, contrary to Nigel's prediction, keenly excited by Sorn's story.

"By Jove! sir, so that's where Joe Bunnett's been hiding all to-day. Well, we'd have found him to-morrow. I was going to have every inch of that wood searched. Sensible of him to try and clear out. We'll get him now, though."

"Just a minute. I had to pretend to Sorn that I was convinced by his tale, after registering a reasonable amount of suspicion at the beginning. But don't tell me you're taken in by it too."

The inspector's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Taken in? Are you suggesting——?"

"Yes, of course I am. It's an attempt, and not a very bright one, to draw our attention away from the real scene of action."

"I don't see that, sir."

"Look here, if the murderer was really hiding in Honeycombe Wood, he'd never be such a fool as to tell Sorn about it. Far too dangerous. He couldn't be certain that Sorn wouldn't split. Let us suppose, as Sorn's story implies, that the murderer has an A.A. key. The obvious thing would have been for him to ring up a garage—giving a false name, of course, ask for a car to meet him at such and such a place, conk the driver over the head, and make off in the car. He'd never trust himself to a chap who is obviously a suspect for the murder himself and therefore has every incentive to get the real murderer caught."

"But supposing Sorn was Joe's accomplice——"

"If Sorn was an accomplice, the last thing he'd want is for the murderer to be caught. Accomplices are apt to get hung. No. Either Sorn really believes that the murderer is in Honeycombe Wood or else he's helping him to escape for an altruistic motive. Whichever way it is, whether Sorn's an unconscious tool or a temporary ally of the murderer, the getaway is going to be in another direction. The idea behind all this is to distract our attention from the brewery."

"The brewery? But why should Bunnett want——?"

"Well, it's your own theory that he needs that passport of his. He would know, after his attempt last night, that the brewery would be more carefully watched. Therefore, he'd have to distract your attention from it."

"You may be right, sir. But I'm going to have Sorn's car waiting in Honeycombe Wood at midnight, for all that."

"Have a fleet of cars waiting if you like. Only don't relax your watch on Bunnett's."

"I'll put Tollworthy on to the car job. Then I'll be getting along to the brewery; it's dark enough now."

It was a little short of ten o'clock when Nigel and the inspector passed through the main entrance of the brewery. A plainclothes man started up out of the shadows and saluted. A whispered conversation was carried on. Then they walked softly through the yard to the side entrance; that too was unobtrusively guarded. If anyone entered the brewery, he was not to be challenged; nor was he to be allowed to get out again. The great brick wall soared up into the darkness above them, the smell of malt and hops was sour upon the night air. They entered the building. Tyler clicked on his electric torch, and made the round of his defences. A man in the clerk's office; the night-watchman, who was to make his tour of inspection at the usual times, but closely followed by a detective-constable; a fourth man in Eustace Bunnett's room, and another at the bottom of the staircase down which the murderer had fled the night before.

Nigel and Inspector Tyler finally settled down to wait in Joe Bunnett's room. So far the murderer had never moved till after midnight. They had nearly two hours' wait before them. Nigel enlivened the time by outlining his own theory of the crimes in a whisper to Tyler. The inspector was impressed but far from convinced.

"The proof of the pudding, sir——" he whispered hoarsely. "We shall know one way or another before the night's out."

"One way or another," thought Nigel. "Yes, no doubt. But it won't be much satisfaction to us if we have to hold a post-mortem on this case in the next world. He's entirely ruthless, probably quite insane by now. I wonder had Joe a revolver. All those passages and staircases—endless opportunities for ambush, and what a good target we should make. Let's hope he shoots at the uniform first. I must really get Georgia to buy me a nice bullet-proof waistcoat— provided, of course, that I don't get a lead lining in the course of to-night's little spree. I should have tumbled to it before. Eliminate the impossible, and what you have left is—— After all, there was no one else who possessed the same qualification as——. Why am I getting so worked up? Even if he does not turn up to-night, we can easily get proof to-morrow. Spades will be trumps and win us the rubber. I'd like to know what he's been doing all to-day. Must have been in the brewery. Quaint, the police searching the brewery this morning and him here all the time. This morning. It seems ages ago. Boom—boom—boom—boom: boom—boom—boom—boom: boom—boom—boom—boom: quarter to twelve. God! Who the devil's that moving about? Oh, Lock, of course; he's in the middle of his rounds now. Our friend won't move till he's finished."

Nigel automatically looked at his watch. He stiffened and looked at it again. It said quarter to eleven. It was hardly possible to believe that they'd not yet been in the brewery for the space of an hour. But—well, then, what was that noise he had heard? Who was moving about? The night-watchman should not yet have begun his round: the policemen had strict orders not to move from their posts—if they heard one blast of the whistle, the men inside the brewery were to run towards the sound; the watchers outside were not to move from their posts unless they heard three blasts.

So whose were the footsteps that Nigel could hear mounting the stairs and already moving along the passage towards their room? He clutched Tyler's arm, and croaked in a voice that he could not prevent from sounding a bit blood-curdled:

"Who's that?"

"Ah. That'll be him, I expect," replied Tyler stodgily. "You leave this to me, sir."

Nigel was quite content to do so.

Hands feeling along the wall, rustling against the door, feeling circumspectly for the lock. Hands, Nigel could not help reminding himself, that had already killed two people, perhaps three. A key turned gently in the lock. Yes, this is all as we arranged. We locked ourselves in here on purpose. We knew he had a key and would be expecting to find the door locked, but——

The door opened, inch by inch. It was too dark to see, but you could feel it opening. A gentle click. The beam of a torch sprang out, focused upon the centre of the floor. Instantaneously, as though it had been a challenge, Tyler put on his torch. For a second the two beams crossed, like swords: then Tyler's stabbed upwards to the face of the intruder.

The face of Gabriel Sorn!

"What the devil——!" exclaimed Tyler.

"Oh, my God!" cried Sorn.

Nigel said urgently: "The key. Where did you get the key?"

But already Sorn, with a little sound like the whimper of a dreaming dog, had flung his torch full at the inspector and bolted out of the room.

Roaring out an oath—he had been struck hard on the cheek-bone—Tyler rushed after him. Then he stopped and blew one blast on his whistle, remembering that the passage and the stairs were blocked.

"Phillips! Hempson! Look out!" he shouted. "Man escaping. Sorn! Stop him!"

Gabriel Sorn had evidently lost his nerve. They could hear him tumbling down the stairs, screaming at the top of his voice. Even after he had run straight into the stout arms of Constable Phillips he continued to struggle and yell. Thus it was that the police inside the brewery failed to hear the faint sound of a whistle from outside: but for the fact that Nigel had been half-expecting this move and had run in the opposite direction from Sorn, towards the entrance of the brewery, the murderer would have claimed another victim and perhaps escaped for good.

Constable Gurney, from his concealment near the side-door of the yard, had observed a figure moving stealthily through it and into the brewery some five minutes before. He had dutifully looked at the illuminated hands of his wrist-watch. Ten forty-four. He moved unobtrusively across to the door, locked it, and leant his solid figure against it. All was going according to plan. If the chap tried to get out this way again he'd get a bit of a shock. It was Gurney, however, who got the shock, as it happened. He was no less stolid, and no more superstitious, than most Dorset countrymen, which is saying a good deal—both ways. He heard the Priory Clock booming quarter to eleven. A few minutes after he heard Sorn screaming, his screams horribly deadened by the solid and invisible wall of the brewery. He heard a police whistle shrill once. "O.K.," he thought, "one blast, stay put!" He leant against the door, staring speculatively high up into the darkness whence this pandemonium had arisen.

Suddenly he heard a faint, scurrying patter of feet, coming in his direction. It all happened too quickly for his slow brain to catch up with. A small figure was scurrying along, almost noiselessly, like the shadow of smoke on a windy day, streaking towards him, moving in a horribly unerring arc from the brewery entrance to the side door. The figure was only eight paces from him when Gurney switched on his torch and focused. What he saw by its light was so unexpected, so appalling to his simple mind, that for a second he stood gaping, his heart stopped dead inside him, he felt he was going to faint. The figure, in its swerving course, ran at the beam of Gurney's torch; it was like a destroyer charging through searchlights. It leapt straight at Gurney. The constable was flung on his back against the door; fingers bit into his throat like wire. At least he knew now that he was fighting flesh and blood. His opponent was vicious and deadly as an imp of darkness; he was all over Gurney's unwieldy body, kicking, biting, his fingers tightening like wire. With a convulsive effort Gurney threw him off for a moment; it gave him time to blow one feeble blast on his whistle; then the imp was at him again.

Nigel heard the whistle as he ran out of the building. He shouted, "Stay where you are!" to the invisible watcher at the main entrance, and ran round the corner towards the side-door. Gurney's assailant heard the shout. He faded away like smoke into the darkness. Nigel rushed up to Gurney:

"You all right?"

"Yes, sir," he gasped. "God! he's a terror. Came at me like—took me all aback, see—why didn't they tell me it was——"

"You saw him?"

"Yessir. Or his ghost."

"It's no ghost. It's Eustace Bunnett all right. Where is he?"

"Made off when he heard you, sir. Looked as if he was running back into the brewery."

"Right. If he tries to get out this way again, use your stick on him."

"Don't you worry, sir. I'll fix the little——all right next time."

Nigel hurried back into the brewery and found the inspector and two constables in the bottling-room downstairs: Tyler was giving Sorn a piece of his mind. Nigel rapidly told him of the murderer's attempt to get out by the side door.

"So you were right, sir. Eustace Bunnett, eh? Well, he can't get away now."

Tyler leapt into action. Lock was sent to reinforce the outside guards. The detective-constable was stationed at the main-switch, to prevent any attempt by Bunnett to plunge the building into darkness during their search. Tyler phoned his headquarters to patrol the roads outside the brewery. While he was making his dispositions, Nigel drew Gabriel Sorn aside.

"Look here," he said, "I realise you put up your little performance to give the murderer a chance of getting away in the confusion. He told you he was Joe Bunnett over the phone, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's Eustace. I haven't time to explain now. But this is going to get you into trouble, and the best thing you can do is to help us from now on: that is, provided your filial piety will allow it. Eustace killed Joe, by the way."

"Filial piety, my foot. I only talked like that to suck you in; but it doesn't seem to have worked. If I can help you to get that devil Eustace, count me in."

"Right. You know where the light switches are. You'd better come with us."

After some argument Tyler consented to this. He now had three constables at his disposal inside the brewery. One of them was told off to keep by Sorn's elbow in case he started any more funny stuff, and the party began their search. First the bottling-room, the head brewer's office and the store-room. In the latter they made their first discovery. Walking over the tops of the huge one and a half cwt. sacks that were stacked upright and close together, a constable noticed a small space between two full sacks, and an empty one lying there.

"That's where he's been hiding all to-day," said Nigel. "Last night, when he was surprised, he must have run in here, found an empty sack, got into it, and wedged himself upright into that space. I suppose these sacks weren't examined individually during your previous searches."

"It was Tollworthy's job, searching this room. I'll have something to say to him," replied the inspector grimly.

Systematically they worked through the ground floor of the brewery, Gabriel Sorn leading the way and snapping on the switches. After twenty-five minutes they passed through the boiler-room and entered the cellars. Their feet trod almost noiselessly on the sandy floor. The whitewashed walls glared back at them, and danced with monstrous shadows. Nigel noticed the rusty wrought-iron gate that guarded the well in its alcove on their right. They passed it, and made their way among the hundreds of barrels that lay like drunken men after an orgy, packed together in sodden immobility. Every corner of the cellars was searched. Suddenly the searchers grew tense; a strange, wheezing, ticking sound arose from the middle of the cellar.

"It's only one of the barrels," said Sorn; "they belch every now and then."

"Well, he doesn't seem to be in here. We'd better go back," Tyler said.

Nigel suddenly clicked his fingers. "The well," he said. It was hardly more than a whisper; but these long gallery-like cellars carried sound uncannily. They had scarcely begun to retrace their steps when they heard a rasping squeak. The iron gate that protected the well was being pushed open. They made a rush; but they were still thirty yards away when Eustace Bunnett stepped out from the alcove, a revolver in his hand. In a rasping, hoarse voice, like the sound of the gate hinges, he said:

"Stand back! Get back, I tell you! What are you doing in my brewery? I'll shoot the lot of you." Then he broke into a stream of foul language. His appearance was so unnerving that they all paused involuntarily for a few seconds. He was wearing a seaman's jersey and trousers, and black sand-shoes. There was a stubble of hair on his chin. His cold eyes glittered madly at them, steely-blue and dangerous as the points of bullets. Worse than that, his hair and clothes were matted with cobwebs, and his mouth was horribly sunken, like the mouth of a corpse. Tyler collected himself, and said:

"Now then, sir, put down that gun."

Nigel had hardly time to grin at the word "sir," when the inspector strode forward, Bunnett's gun roared out, and Tyler spun round clutching his arm and dropped behind one of the barrels.

"Get down, men!" he ordered, biting his lips with pain.

They all took cover. Tyler whispered to the constable next to him, "Broken my arm, I think. Draw his fire," and fainted.

The constable removed his helmet and pushed it slowly above the top of the barrel he lay behind. There was a bang, a plock, and a hiss, then a smell of beer incongruously spreading into the air. Bunnett had holed the barrel. He glared at them for a second: then rushed for the door, snapping out the switch as he went. Tripping over barrels in the pitch-darkness, it took them half a minute to reach the door and turn on the light again. The door was locked. Sorn fumbled for his master-key. As he did so, the air was shocked by a terrifying sound, a sound deafening and inhuman like some gigantic machine crying out in a nightmare. Whoo-ah! whoo-hooo-hoooo-ah! Above this whooping screech they could just hear Sorn yelling.

"My God! He's turned the cold water into the boiler! The whole place'll go sky high! Get out, all of you!"

He flung the door open. Two constables hoisted Tyler up and staggered with him towards the brewery entrance. Nigel ran in front, turning back the reinforcements that had been hurrying towards the sound of the shots. Only when they had poured through the yard, out of the main gate into the street, did Nigel notice that Gabriel Sorn was missing and the moaning of the boiler's safety-valve had ceased. His mind scarcely had time to register this, when Constable Gurney appeared, the body of Eustace Bunnett slung insensible over his shoulder. Bunnett had made a dash for the side door while his late pursuers were rushing out through the main gates. But Constable Gurney was not to be caught napping this time. Emerging from his concealment he had batoned Eustace Bunnett as he bent down to unlock the door: occupied with the key, Bunnett had not time to aim his revolver before the blow fell.

Ten minutes later, Gabriel Sorn was discovered, lying in a dead faint beside the boiler. He had raked out the furnace just in time to save all their lives.

Chapter XV

July 21, 8 p.m.

Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt!
SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

"Yes, it was a remark of yours that first put me on to it, Sophie."

"Mine? I'm sure I didn't say anything——"

"Oh, but you did. You did indeed. Do you remember telling me about Joe's engaging little schoolboy tricks? Making figures out of fruit and matches, pretending his teeth had fallen into the soup?"

"Of course, but——"

"It was that last item which put it into my head that perhaps it was Joe and not Eustace whose body we'd found in the copper."

Herbert Cammison's swarthy face betrayed a certain impatience. "Why not start at the beginning," he suggested. "Less melodrama and more continuity is what we want."

"Sorry. I do so enjoy making an exhibitionist of myself. Well, then, I'll table the data in due order, starting at seven-thirty last night when I sat down upstairs to digest them."

"I thought it was beer you were digesting," said Sophie.

"So it was. I find it conducive to thought," replied Nigel with dignity. "We'll, as you mention it, I will have another glass. Better late than never. And you might as well leave the bottle beside me. Thank you."

Nigel drank deeply.

"Well," he continued, "when all was said and done, the really odd thing about this murder remained—why was the body put into the copper at all? The obvious reason seemed, to conceal the method of murder: which pointed, of course, to an expert professional killer—Herbert, in fact."

"Oh!" gasped Sophie, quite forgetting her knitting for a moment; "surely you never suspected *him?*"

"Didn't I just!"

Herbert gazed at him with mild curiosity. "Yes, you would. Why not?" he said dispassionately.

"We aim to explore every avenue. I thought of him first as a soloist, so to speak: then, when it became evident that Joe had planned to murder Eustace, I considered Herbert as a possible accomplice—very favourably, I may say. He had the motive, the brain, the technical knowledge, and the nerve."

"Thank you," said Herbert.

"Not at all."

"What are you talking about?" complained Sophie. "First you say Eustace murdered Joe and then you say Joe planned to murder Eustace. I think you're boozed up."

"That's just what did happen. *The wrong murder was committed.* As I say, there seemed no possible reason why, if Joe's plan had been successful—and the fragment of ring I found proved that it had gone pretty far towards success, he should have transferred the body from the refrigerator-room to the pressure-copper. Any injury he had done to Eustace in the course of stuffing him into that room could surely have been explained by Eustace's struggles to get out. Then I suddenly remembered what you said about Joe's teeth. Pretending your teeth have fallen into the soup implies that you have false teeth."

"But, damn it, the dentist reconstructed the plates found in the hop-back: he has no doubt they're Eustace's. I don't see——"

"Nor did I at first. Then it suddenly occurred to me—and I verified it by ringing up the dentist last night—that the teeth had been identified as Eustace's, but no one had thought of comparing them with the jaws of the body. It was a scandalous error, I admit, but we none of us had any doubt that the body was Eustace. The dentist had tried the sets on the plaster-cast he'd made of Eustace's jaws when the sets were originally constructed. He told me he had casts for Joe and Mrs. Bunnett, too, which corroborated my idea that Joe had false teeth."

"Yes, of course, I see," Dr. Cammison said softly.

"So I asked myself—supposing Eustace turned the tables on his brother and killed him? He could exchange clothes with Joe, remove Joe's plates, throw the body into the copper and chuck his *own* teeth in after it. He could rely on the plates getting pretty well bashed about in the boiling process; they would be recognised by his dentist as Eustace's teeth, but there was a good chance that they could not be reconstructed accurately enough to show that they didn't fit the jaws of the body and so give the substitution away. But surely, I thought next, our efficient medico, Herbert Cammison, F.R.C.S., would not be misled into confusing Joe's body with Eustace's. Then I remembered. There was nothing but bone and hair left: and I had seen Joe's passport, which stated that he was five foot eight—that is, within an inch of Eustace's height; and Herbert had told me that in reconstructing the skeleton one had to allow a margin of error of two inches. The passport also said that Joe had light hair. You must remember I'd only seen a photograph of him, in which the brilliantine of his hair made it look dark; I'd assumed all along that he had dark hair. Very well: the remains in the copper were of roughly the same stature and of the same-coloured hair as Joe. Eustace, by the way, had to cut off Joe's moustache before he dumped him in the copper. Oh, yes, he was very thorough, and cold-blooded as a fish; he needed to be.

"Well, my mind running on teeth—racing on them, in fact—jumped to another tiny bit of evidence. The crumbs in Joe's attic. Now, Eustace had got rid of his own teeth; he would not be able to eat anything but soft stuff. Again, if he put Joe into the copper, it must have been he who burgled his own house and was hiding out in Joe's. It was interesting, therefore, that I found the remains only of bread and cake in Joe's attic—no trace of any other kind of food. With this on my mind, I rang up Mrs. Bunnett's house and got on to the cook. She said that only bread and cake had disappeared from the larder: the Sunday joint was left. That obviously pointed to Eustace. Whoever took the food must have brought a bag of some sort to put it in. Why shouldn't he take the joint too? Because, if it was Eustace, the joint was no use to him—he had no teeth to chew up the meat with."

"What about the crusts of the bread, then?" asked Herbert.

"Crusts become soft if you mumble them in your mouth long enough. Well, then, what with the teeth, the crumbs and the passport, a case against Eustace was beginning to build itself up. Another little point occurred to me. Lock, questioned as to the person he had surprised outside Joe Bunnett's office in the brewery on Sunday night, said first that he'd thought it must be a ghost. Now that was an odd thing for a night-watchman to say quite seriously: night-watchmen are not imaginative; they couldn't stand their jobs if they were in the least susceptible to 'ghoulies and ghosties and things that go woomph in the night.' So mightn't it be that subconsciously, from the brief encounter he had with this mysterious figure, he had registered the impression of Eustace Bunnett?

"You see, up to midnight on Thursday last, the actions of Joe and Eustace were the actions of murderer and murderee respectively. There was no possible doubt that Joe had planned a murder and gone to commit it. Supposing, I said to myself, Joe had attacked Eustace in the brewery and Eustace had killed him instead: supposing then, that Eustace for some reason decided the best thing was to swop identities with Joe; he must have discovered, in the course of conversation with his brother, that *The Gannet* was lying in Basket Cove: later he would realise that this had been planned by Joe as an alibi. Therefore if Joe was to be made out as the murderer, something must be done to explain why he had not made use of this alibi. If the police found *The Gannet* floating in Basket Cove, with a bewildered Bloxam on board, they would ask themselves—why didn't Joe return and go off in the boat? It was indicated, therefore, that *The Gannet* should be scuppered.

"We now come to the evidence of the tramp. He said that about two or three on Friday morning he heard a motor-bike going inland and saw a glow in the sky. I began to realise the times were all wrong. You see, if Joe murdered Eustace, he scheduled to get back to the cove soon after one o'clock. On the theory that Joe committed the murder successfully, one would have to presume that, by the time he returned to *The Gannet,* it had already accidentally caught fire and was blazing so merrily that he couldn't put it out. But petrol-caused fires burn up fiercely and consume quickly. So, if the fire was at its height when Joe arrived at 1.10 a.m., it was unlikely that between two and three a.m. it would still be blazing so ferociously as to make the glow in the sky which the tramp saw. On the other hand, if Eustace had killed Joe, thought out a plan of action, changed clothes with the body, etc., and ridden off on Joe's motor-bike, he couldn't arrive at the cove much before 2 a.m. The glow in the sky, and the sound of the motor-bike, therefore, were much more consistent with Eustace's responsibility for the whole thing.

"All that, of course, was highly theoretical. It depended upon the tramp's having a fairly accurate sense of time—which was likely, and on *The Gannet* not having caught fire accidentally—which was more than likely: it was obviously vital for Joe to drug Bloxam effectively, and this put out of court the idea that Bloxam could have set fire to the boat through carelessness.

"Everything so far was consistent with Eustace as murderer and Joe as victim. Proof of the latter could be obtained soon enough by comparing the reconstructed sets of teeth with the jaws of the body. Equally, if the victim was found to be Joe, then it followed almost certainly that the murderer was Eustace; for Eustace had disappeared, and no one else—except Sorn—had an interest in its being established that Eustace was dead. But I didn't suspect Gabriel Sorn: after all, it was too far-fetched altogether to imagine that he would kill Joe in order to dress him up as Eustace and then throw suspicion on him. Any lingering doubts I had of Sorn were dispelled when he came to see me last night. He evidently believed that it was Joe who had done the murder, was in concealment and had just telephoned him to help in a getaway. Sorn hated Eustace, hated him all the more when he realised he was his father: he had no compunction in helping the man he thought was Eustace's murderer to escape. Unfortunately, he told his story in a sadly unconvincing way."

"But I can't understand why Eustace wanted to disappear like that, to change places with Joe. Making up Joe like himself and putting him in the copper—why, it was sentencing himself to death," Sophie said.

"Yes, it worried me, that. When Sorn told me that his mother was a proud creature, I began to understand; and Eustace's confession has cleared it up. Still, we must gratify your husband's indecent craving for continuity. Having satisfied myself that Joe was the one who had got murdered, and Eustace the one who'd done it, I was in a much better position to explain subsequent events. You see, I was prepared to believe that Gabriel Sorn, or Mr. Barnes, or Herbert were capable of murdering Joe: but I couldn't believe that any of them would proceed so remorselessly to plant incriminating evidence against him. Only a Eustace Bunnett would murder a chap and then try to prove the chap guilty of his own murder. There was something vindictive in the way Joe's name was blackened after his death: and Ariadne Mellors was killed in a vindictive way; and worst of all was setting fire to *The Gannet* with that poor chap Bloxam on board."

"Good God! You think Eustace realised he was on board?" said Dr. Cammison.

"He has admitted it. This utterly remorseless and vindictive behaviour seemed to me to square up with none of the people connected with the crime except Eustace. It was this that trapped him in the end—poetic justice all right; if he'd not made that last incursion into the brewery on Sunday night, to call our attention to Joe's passport and emphasise Joe's guilt still further, he'd probably be a free man today crossing the seas and looking forward to living on the property he had bequeathed to Mrs. Sorn."

Dr. Cammison nodded his head slowly a number of times. "Ah, I see. Of course. I was wondering how—Yes, of course."

"Eustace's confession clears up the minor points. I'll just give you the gist of it. Extraordinary chap. The jury'll have a job deciding whether it's Broadmoor or the gallows."

"Yes," said Herbert crisply. "It's an interesting comment on our social system that a fellow like Bunnett, whose whole life was a series of more or less legalised crimes, has to kill three people before we put him where he can't do any more mischief."

"The confession, then. Eustace arrived at the brewery five minutes before midnight. Joe met him at the entrance, and spun a story about having received an anonymous letter *re* the night-watchman. Eustace says his suspicions were aroused at the very beginning by this; he asked Joe how he'd got there, where *The Gannet* was, and so on. Joe didn't mind telling him all this, because dead men tell no tales and it was necessary to give Eustace a reasonable explanation of his movements if he was to get him into the brewery. Eustace pretended to accept all this; but he kept a wary eye on Joe from then on. The two entered the brewery and went along towards the bottom of the staircase that leads up to the office: Joe had suggested they should wait in his room till Lock should have finished his rounds. Suddenly Joe whispered, 'Look out! He's coming this way,' and made a dash into the refrigerator-room which was the nearest hiding-place. Eustace followed him, taken in for a moment by the trick: if he'd stopped to think, he'd have realised, of course—what Joe knew very well—that by this time Lock's round had taken him a long way from that part of the premises.

"As soon as they were both inside the refrigerator-room, Joe struck at Eustace, aiming to knock him out. But in the darkness he missed and hit his knuckles hard on that refrigerator by the door. Eustace's suspicions became certainty. He struck back, knocking Joe down with a lucky blow. Then he saw red. This weakling of a brother, whom he had despised and downtrodden all his life, having the audacity to turn upon him! In a sheer frenzy of rage he flung himself at Joe and strangled him before he had time to recover from the effect of the blow.

"So now Eustace was faced with the question that has worried every murderer from Cain downwards—what shall I do with the body? He didn't dare risk walking straight out and saying to Lock, 'My brother has just attacked me and I had to kill him in self-defence.' No doubt it would have been the best thing to do; and, backed by evidence they might have found on *The Gannet*, it might have convinced the police. On the other hand, a good case might have been made out for Eustace having lured Joe into the brewery: unconsciously, too, Eustace probably realised that nobody would take his word against that of the dead man—a dead man as popular as Joe was. Anyway, he hadn't the nerve just then to tell the truth. His mind was habituated to dealing tortuously rather than straightforwardly with any given situation. What shall I do with the body? he asked himself. And then, so he says—a rather patronising interest in literature was one of his minor unpleasing traits, as you know—two lines of *Hamlet* came unbidden into his head.

"Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!"

And at once he remembered what had become of Truffles. He would put the body into the pressure-copper. But that was not enough. Next day the remains would be found: it would be recognised at once as murder: awkward questions would be asked: somebody *might* have seen Eustace stealing out of his house into the brewery. It was at this point that the brilliant idea struck him of exchanging identities with Joe. Joe had planned to murder him, had devised an alibi, had inadvertently left some clues, maybe, pointing to himself. Very well then, Joe had done everything necessary to incriminate himself except commit the murder. The logical thing was to make it seem that Joe *had* committed the murder. A simple, coldly logical piece of reasoning. I must say I admire it very much. A pity Eustace spoilt it by over-complication later.

"Very well, Eustace was to be murdered. A change of clothes, some gruesome business with the teeth, and the pressure-copper would do the rest. Joe was of the same physique and height as Eustace. But what would happen to Eustace? He must disappear, and leave not a wrack behind. He could not draw cheques in his own name. Banks will not accept the signature of a ghost. At once his thoughts turned to Mrs Sorn. In his young days, when she was a pretty and inexperienced girl, he had met her abroad and had an affair with her. A child, Gabriel, was born. But Eustace refused to marry her, then: he was ambitious, and she had no money. Deserted by him, disowned by her family, she settled down with her child in the south of France and scraped along by giving English lessons. In due course, Eustace built up the business here and became a rich man. Mrs. Sorn, who had always given it out that she was a widow, heard of Eustace's success and wrote suggesting that he should do something for their child. Whether it went as far as blackmail, I don't know. Possibly not, but Eustace had become a respectable man: he could not afford to let it be known that he had an illegitimate son and had treated the mother so badly. So he paid for Gabriel's education, and later—perhaps under pressure—took him into the brewery.

"When Mrs. Sorn got into communication with him again he remembered her beauty and charm; he could afford to marry her now, and asked her; but she—very sensibly—wasn't taking it. She did not conceal her contempt for him and his past conduct, and in a fit of pique he went off and married the present Emily Bunnett, who was a barmaid in one of his pubs and a fetching enough creature physically in those days. He soon got tired of Emily; but she managed the house all right and was an adequate punching-ball when Eustace was in one of his vindictive, bullying moods. But Mrs. Sorn remained his thorn in the flesh. She was his one failure, the one person over whom he could not domineer. And I think it was a grudging admiration for her independence, plus maybe a certain remorse for his past treatment of her, that made him leave her the bulk of his property in his will.

"Now, at any rate, with the body of his brother before him, he was thankful he had made that will; for it solved the whole financial problem. All he had to do was to get out of the country, turn up after a decent interval at Mrs. Sorn's villa, assume another identity and live on the inheritance he had left her. He could rely on her not daring to give him up to the police. Her family pride, of which Gabriel Sorn told me, her passionate love for Gabriel himself, would—Eustace judged—make it impossible for her to betray him. If Eustace was handed over to justice, everything would come out. Gabriel would be branded for life as the bastard son of a murderer. Eustace as a murderer, in fact, would have a far stronger hold over Mrs. Sorn than Eustace, the respectable brewer, ever had.

"So that was that. Eustace turned on his electric torch, changed clothes, ring, etc., with Joe's body, carried it to the pressure-copper and tipped it in. The only things of his own he kept were twenty pounds in notes and the duplicate keys. We'll see why he needed them in a minute. He then went off on Joe's motor-bike; it was he whom Sorn heard riding away from the brewery at 12.40 a.m. It naturally took him longer than it would have taken Joe to reach the cove; he knew its position, but he didn't know the quickest way to it; nor had he ridden a motor-bike since his youth. So he didn't get to Basket Down till between one-fifteen and one-thirty. He left the bike at the top of the cliff, found the bridle path (he had Joe's torch), found the dinghy, and rowed out to *The Gannet.* His idea was to pour petrol over the stern of the vessel and set fire to it, thus —as he hoped—giving the impression that the engine had caught fire accidentally. It was a bit weak, all that, but he hadn't the time or the skill for an expert piece of incendiarism. Anyway, the main thing was to get rid of the yacht so that the police would be kept guessing for several days about Joe's whereabouts. He found the spare petrol tins and doused the stern. Then he discovered that he had no matches. He went into the cabin to get some, and saw Bloxam lying there in his drugged sleep. It was a bit of a shock to Eustace. However, he was not to be diverted from his purpose by a trifle like that. He got a box of matches—incidentally laying hands on some soft food, Joe's revolver, and all Joe's money he could find—set fire to the boat, left her and Bloxam to burn, rowed ashore, hid the dinghy in the cave, and returned to Maiden Astbury. He concealed the motor-bike in Honeycombe Wood, hoping it would eventually be found and provide a clue against Joe. He had been wearing Joe's gloves throughout, to guard against leaving fingerprints. He walked down Honeycombe Hill, let himself into Joe's house with the keys he had taken from Joe's body, and retired to the attic.

"A rather ticklish problem now presented itself. He had to stay long enough to lay a number of false clues against Joe—to impress the police with the idea that Joe was alive and behaving in a suspicious way: he must not leave the country till the body in the copper was established as Eustace's, for otherwise inquiries for Eustace might still be proceeding at the English ports: at the same time, every day he stayed increased the risk of his being more or less accidentally found. On Saturday night he crept out and burgled his own house. That's what he'd kept his duplicate keys for. He stole the Roxby's papers, but left the file to call attention to Joe's motive for murder: he stole food, for his own benefit—there was none in Joe's house, of course: he also got his own passport. Nobody knew of its existence, and therefore nobody missed it. I ought to have thought of it, though: Mrs. Bunnett told us he used to go off on rather furtive holidays abroad. The middle-aged gentleman who disported himself in an improper manner on the Continent must not by any chance be identified with the upright brewer of Maiden Astbury. So Eustace had wangled a passport in another name—we found it on him—the name of James Henderson; and it was as James Henderson that he proposed to enter France and arrive at Mrs. Sorn's villa.

"On Sunday he, very suitably, rested—except for a few little matters like smearing Joe's brilliantine on the cushion in the attic. That night, judging that the police guard on the brewery would have been withdrawn by now, he intended to enter the brewery and leave a few more clues against Joe. His state of mind, as far as we can gather, was very interesting at this point. Brooding over the whole business in his solitary confinement, he'd begun to imagine himself as the hidden hand of justice. Joe, after all, was the real murderer—the murderer in intention: Eustace had killed him only in self-defence: Joe was the real criminal, and it was Eustace's duty to see that the police should be made to realise this. Eustace, of course, was always self-righteous enough for three, and all this was merely a rationalisation of his bitter hatred of Joe for having dared to turn upon him and put him in such a perilous position. But it was a powerful enough rationalisation, for all that. Joe must be pursued, even in death: his good name must be blackened: he must be exposed as the cowardly murderer that he had tried to be.

"It was this that caused Eustace to over-reach himself. He should have made his getaway that night, instead of visiting the brewery; especially after he'd killed Miss Mellors. He had just climbed down from the attic when he heard somebody entering the house and coming upstairs. He'd not time to climb back into the attic; so he darted into the study and picked up the poker. Miss Mellors came in, and that sealed her fate, poor thing. Eustace got another of his fits of blind, panicky rage, and went on battering her long after it had ceased to be necessary. After a pause to recover himself, he went on to the brewery; there he was surprised by Lock before he could get into Joe's room. He nipped downstairs, but found his escape cut off by the constable, whom he heard running in: so he slipped down the passage and hid in the store-room.

"So there he was, properly trapped; all through his overzealousness for justice. Tollworthy missed him in his search: he didn't examine each sack, and I don't really wonder. So Eustace got a reprieve of a sort—if you call standing up inside a sack for the best part of twenty-four hours a reprieve. He could shift his position as much as he wanted, of course; the store-room is not constantly visited during the day. Still, it must have been a painful enough business—and serve him damn well right. At about eight-thirty, when the coast was likely to be clear and he knew Lock would be elsewhere, he slipped out, went up to his private room and telephoned Sorn. He disguised his voice, of course, and accounted for the curious sounds he must have made by saying that he had to whisper. He told Sorn he was Joe Bunnett speaking from Mrs. Bunnett's house, played up to his sympathies, and begged him to make a diversion which should aid him to escape. It was a hell of a gamble, of course. But he banked on Sorn's romantic agin-the-law nature, his hatred of Eustace and his affection for Joe. He safeguarded himself up to a point by pretending that Mrs. Bunnett had given him sanctuary. If Sorn split to the police, they would search there first. However, Sorn ate it all right. He agreed to come to me with a story—in which Eustace coached him over the phone—that the murderer was hiding in Honeycombe Wood and proposed to make a getaway with the aid of Sorn's car, that night. This, of course, was to draw the police away from the brewery, and it would certainly have succeeded if I'd swallowed Sorn's story.

"What Eustace—in the character of Joe—told Sorn he was really going to do was to dash off in the opposite direction in Eustace's car, make for Southampton, and get a boat abroad. To do this, he said, he must have his passport. He'd made one attempt to get it and failed. So he asked Sorn to get it for him and bring it to Eustace's house. That was a very clever move on Eustace's part. If Sorn succeeded in getting Joe's passport, it would be because the coast was clear, and, therefore, Eustace would already be on his way to Southampton: he was intending to use his own car all right. If, on the other hand, the police were not tricked by Sorn's story, they would catch him as he entered Joe's room and that would provide a diversion during which Eustace might manage to escape.

"Well, as you know, it was the latter that happened: or nearly. Sorn signally failed to suck me in with his story. We had every bolthole from the brewery blocked up; so, when Sorn crept in by the side door, took the master-key from the office, and let himself into Joe Bunnett's room, he got the fright of his life. In fact, he acted up better than Eustace could have hoped: he lost his nerve and kicked up such a shindy that Eustace very nearly got away under cover of it. He as near as nothing got past the constable at the side door. Failing there, he shot back into the brewery and led us a dance that makes a good many gangster films look like cold mutton. But you know about that."

"It must have given you a turn when you heard the boiler safety valve begin to blow off. We could hear it from here," said Herbert.

"Yes, that was a pretty unsavoury moment. Sorn ought to get a medal for what he did: it was about ten to one on his being blown into hundreds and thousands: he told me this morning that he had often imagined in phantasy this situation arising and himself playing the hero who should draw the fires from under the boiler, so when it did actually happen in real life he jumped to it automatically—shows you there's something to be said for phantasy-building. But the worst moment, I think, was when Eustace emerged from the well—he'd hidden behind that iron gate and got himself covered with cobwebs. The combination of cobwebs and sunken mouth—it's extraordinary how much the absence of teeth alters the human face for the worse—made him so disagreeably resemble a risen corpse that my stomach turned over like a catherine wheel. And of course that gun in his hand didn't improve one's morale either. You'd never think an oldish man like him would have the stamina to do all he did. It suggests he must have been insane since Joe attacked him in the refrigerator-room: it's what you'd expect when a man who has wielded almost unlimited power suddenly finds himself outlawed from society."

Nigel took a turn or two round the room, absent-mindedly picking up ornaments and putting them down again.

"No," he said, "it's been a dirty, untidy case in most ways, even though it does add force to a certain well-worn phrase."

"Namely?"

"There's trouble brewing."

THE SMILER WITH THE KNIFE

"Ther saugh I first the derke imagining
Of felonye, and al the compassing;
The smyler with the knyf under the cloke;
The shepne brenning with the blake smoke;
The treson of the mordring in the bedde;
The open werre, with woundes al bibledde."

CHAUCER: *The Knight's Tale*

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Chapter 1

The Episode of the Major's Mother

A morning in January. Sunlight welled in through the low windows of the cottage, giving the beams, the great stone fireplace, the Dutch rushmats on the flagged floor a look of freshness as if they had been spring-cleaned. After the constant rain of the last few months, this sunshine was more than a blessing—it was a miracle. Living in the country, thought Georgia, you really are a part of the seasons: in the dark months you hibernate, the blood slows down, the mind goes sluggish; and then one morning something stirs in the air, the sun comes through, and life begins to move at a different tempo. I must be getting domesticated, though, she thought, because I don't want to leave here at all, ever, and I believe I never shall. The idea was so odd that she stopped in the middle of stirring her tea, her hand remaining poised over the cup. Always, until now, when the first whisper of spring made itself heard, Georgia had felt restless: something in the distance seemed to tug at her imagination and her body, and as often as not she would yield to it and go traipsing off on one of those journeys that had made her the most famous woman traveller of her day.

Today, she did not know whether to be glad or sorry that this influence was not felt. Perhaps it's just that I'm getting old, she said to herself; after all, I'm thirty-seven, and at that age a female ought to be sobering up.

She was roused from her day-dream by Nigel, who put his hand over hers and made her swish the spoon round in the tea-cup.

"Shall I draw the curtains?" he asked politely.

"Draw the curtains?"

"Yes. You looked as if you'd had a touch of the sun."

Georgia laughed. Dear Nigel—he always knows what's in my mind. She said, "You're not quite right this time, though. I was thinking that I'm getting domesticated. Are *you* still glad we came here?"

"Mm. I must say I had my doubts these last few months. Living in the country is one thing, and living on a half-submerged derelict is another."

"Oh, it wasn't quite as bad as that."

"My dear, the house was positively awash. Gales beating up the valley, all our timbers shivering, windows streaming with rain. When *did* you last manage to see out of those windows?"

"You look all the better for it," said Georgia, glancing affectionately at her husband.

"The sedentary life has always suited me. And of course there's a certain moral dignity attached to living in these outposts of empire."

"What I can't understand is how you manage to thrive on doing nothing."

"I'm not doing nothing. I'm translating Hesiod."

"I mean never taking any exercise or——"

"What d'you mean—never taking exercise? Don't I walk down to the pub every evening? If you expect me to come splodging through the mud with you every afternoon as well——"

"I like this place, mud or no mud," Georgia said dreamily. "I shall settle down here. Deeper and deeper. Like a turnip."

"Knowing you, I should say that was improbable. And now let's see what news there is from civilization."

He began to open his letters. The post had brought nothing for Georgia but a seed-catalogue, in which she was soon immersed. Presently she giggled. "Listen to this. 'The Duchesse de Parma is very showy, a splendid bedder, orange-red edged with yellow.' Shall we have the Duchesse in the garden? She sounds just your type."

"Here's an extraordinary communication," said Nigel a few minutes later.

"Oh, dear," Georgia sighed. That was the worst of being married to a private investigator. You never knew when a letter would come out of the blue, and Nigel be dragged into some queer criminal tangle. Not that they really needed the substantial fees he charged, either. It was just his insatiable curiosity that led him into one case after another. "What is it this time? Murder? Or a bit of blackmail?"

"Oh, neither. It's our hedge."

"Hedge? What——?"

"Listen, and I'll tell you." Holding up the printed form, Nigel Strangeways began to read out, " 'Pursuant to the provisions of an act of Parliament—pom pom pom—I, the undersigned, the Surveyor of Highways—pom pom—do hereby give you notice, and require you forthwith to cut, prune and trim your hedges next adjoining the County Roads—pom pom—and also to pare the sides of such hedges close to the bank, and the growth on the top of such hedges at least perpendicular from the Comb, and to cut down, prune or lop the branches of trees, bushes and shrubs—pom pom pom *pom*—in such manner that the said Roads shall not be prejudiced by the shade thereof, and that the Sun and Wind may not be excluded therefrom to the damage thereof, and to remove the material cut therefrom.' Pom. Isn't that superb? The tongue that Milton spoke. Who'd have thought there was such poetry in the soul of a Surveyor of Highways? 'that the said Roads shall not be prejudiced by the shade thereof, and that the Sun and Wind may not be excluded therefrom.' "

Nigel began singing the phrases to the tune of Purcell's Chant.

"What happens if we disobey the S. of H.?"

"We get complained of to a Justice of the Peace."

"Well, thank goodness," said Georgia. "I thought at first it was another bit of trouble on the way."

And indeed it was, though neither of them could possibly have foreseen it. It was not, after all, reasonable to suppose that a notice from a Rural District Council could cause any one much trouble—let alone alter the course of history, or that England might be saved by the cutting of a hedge. Yet so it turned out. Looking back on it all afterwards, Georgia seemed to see those enormous events, like the angels of the Schoolmen standing on pin-points, balanced upon a few tiny and precarious ifs. If we had taken a cottage in any other county in England, we shouldn't have had to pare the hedge ourselves, for Devonshire is the only county where landowners still have to cut their own hedges on the road side. If the sun had not come out that morning, I'd probably have left the hedge for the gardener to do. If any one else had cut it, he'd probably not have noticed the locket—Nigel always said I have eyes like a hawk—poor darling, he's so short-sighted himself: and, even if it had been found, only a person of Nigel's inquisitiveness would have bothered to give it more than one glance. And, talking of inquisitiveness, what about the magpie?—it must surely have been a magpie that started the whole thing. Yes, if that anonymous magpie hadn't had an attack of kleptomania, the locket would never have got into the hedge. Which only goes to show that crime does sometimes pay. . . .

The sun poured in through the cottage window, increasing the pallor of Nigel's face. Like many other things about him—his untidy, tow-coloured hair, for instance, or the childish pout of his underlip—this pallor was deceptive. His health was far from delicate, his character not in the very least childish: you realized the latter as soon as you looked at his eyes, which were sane, kindly, a little detached, but liable at any moment to narrow and spark into the most concentrated attention. Georgia knew well enough what a self-sufficient creature he was; yet she liked sometimes to pretend that he needed looking after, and he played up to her pretence with the same subdued, affectionate amusement.

She was thinking now, how could I ever leave Nigel? He does need me. But supposing I get the itch to travel again? On a day like this, it might come over me any minute. I must be forearmed against it.

"I think I'll have a go at the hedge myself," she said. "This morning."

"Mm." Nigel's face was buried in the newspaper. Georgia felt a sudden impulse to make him acknowledge her mood, to shake him out of his gentle security.

"Would you mind very much if I left you, Nigel?"

He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and gazed at her with interest. "For another man, do you mean? I should say I'd be very cross indeed."

"Don't be silly. Went on my travels again, I mean."

"Have you any particular expedition in mind?"

"Not exactly. But——"

"I suppose I'd get on all right," said Nigel. "It'd seem a long time, though, till you came back."

Georgia leant over him, kissed the top of his head. "Oh, I'm glad I married you and no one else," she whispered.

Yes, she thought a few minutes later, as she put on her old gardening coat and loose leather gloves, I *am* lucky. There's no other man in the world who could have resisted pointing out my inconsistency—first saying I wanted to be a turnip and a moment later raving about going off to the ends of the earth. What can it be that Nigel finds attractive about me, she wondered, happily studying in her mirror the small, irregular features of a face that could change so quickly from vivacity to a plaintive, appealing ugliness. "She looks like the ghost of an organ-grinder's monkey," one of their friends had once said. Pretty accurate, and not altogether unflattering, she thought, grimacing at herself. She was to find out before long how queerly prophetic that absurd conversation with Nigel had been.

For the present, though, there was nothing but the sunlight and the fields folding down from the hill above like the fall of a green dress. The lane ran from the village past their cottage over the brow of the hill; you could get to the sea that way, after five miles of rough going; but motorists usually gave one look at its fearful gradients and—if they succeeded in turning their car—scurried back to the main road. Where she stood, on the high bank above the lane, Georgia could see the thatched, whitewashed cottage that seemed to have dug itself out a niche in the hillside, the silver coils of the river in the valley below, and beyond it a tumble of green and brown hills ranging up towards the horizon. Everything was peaceful. There was no sound or movement but the distant rattle of an express that hurried westward on the far side of the valley, white smoke laid along its back like an ostrich feather. Georgia took up her bill-hook and attacked the hedge.

Nigel found her there when he strolled out of the house an hour later. He stood in the lane, looking up at her. Dark hair fell about her face; the exercise had brought a carnation flush to her pale brown skin; she attacked the hedge with a kind of savage grace, unaware for a moment that he was watching her.

"Still hacking our way through the primeval undergrowth?" he commented politely.

She turned quickly, involuntarily smoothing back the hair from her face. "Goodness! It's hard work. I must look like Medusa."

"If ivory could blush, it would look like you."

Georgia jumped down from the bank into the lane. One foot, slipping back, displaced the olive and coppery sediment of leaves that lay in the ditch. As she recovered herself, Georgia's eye caught a dull gleam among the leaves. She bent down and picked up a small, round metal object, tarnished by the weather to the colour of a decaying leaf.

"Look what I've found. Buried treasure."

Nigel took it, examined it curiously. "Some sort of a locket, isn't it? A very cheap one, I should think Woolworth's. I wonder how it got there."

"Folk courting under the hedge. What a pity—I thought it was real gold at first. Chuck it away."

"No," said Nigel, "I'd like to see what there is inside."

"Darling, you're incorrigible, you really are. All you'll find is a piece of greasy hair or a photo of some popeyed peasant."

"It's going to be quite a job to get it opened," said Nigel absentmindedly, feeling in his pockets. "My penknife's indoors somewhere."

"Don't cut yourself," she called out after him, half-seriously. Nigel was not too clever with his hands.

When she came in to prepare lunch, Nigel was sitting at his desk.

"I say, what do you suppose 'E.B.' stands for?" he said over his shoulder.

"Early Bird," Georgia suggested.

He handed her a small paper disk, a little discoloured, but showing plainly a Union Jack and the letters E.B. stamped on it.

"No, it must be Eat British," she said. "Where did you find it?"

"It was in the locket. And this too."

Georgia looked down at the thing he put in her hand—a round piece of cardboard, a daguerreotype depicting the face of a young woman with heavily marked eyebrows, and gleaming black hair parted in the middle and falling to her bare shoulders in thick corkscrew curls. The head, tilted a little to one side, gave a touch of coquetry to her expression, softening the brooding intelligence of mouth and eyes. In line, the face was an oval of singular purity.

"She's a beauty, isn't she? What's she doing with a Union Jack in this trashy locket?"

"That's just what I was wondering," said Nigel. "You see, the odd thing is that the flag was sandwiched between the picture and a cardboard back. If the whole thing hadn't been a bit damp, I'd never have noticed the join. Why should the owner want to conceal the Union Jack inside his beautiful relative?"

"What a snooper you are! Well, I expect there's some quite simple explanation. Come and have lunch."

"I'll just stick the whole dingus together again." Nigel pasted the rims of the two disks, put the paper flag between them, fitted them inside the locket and tossed it down on his desk. There it lay for a couple of days, and might have lain for months if Fate, in the improbable guise of the Folyton Bell-Ringers, had not once again taken a hand.

The Strangeways had passed the time of day quite often with Major Keston as he passed their cottage to and from his house over the hill. They knew that he had built this house two years before, and although a comparative newcomer to the village was already a power in it. But he had shown no sign yet of extending hospitality to them, and they for their part did not suppose he would be at all their sort. It was therefore a surprise when he landed up at the door with his bull-terrier that evening—a small, hard-bitten figure of a man with a slightly aggressive manner and the kind of eyes that meant, in Nigel's experience, either a bad liver or a permanent grievance.

"See you've settled in all right," he remarked, glancing round the room with a curiosity that contrived to be both furtive and faintly impudent. "Snug little billet, this. How does the Mem like country life?"

Nigel gathered he was referring to Georgia. "Oh, very well, thanks. She'll be down in a minute. Will you have a drink?"

"Thanks, no. Don't touch it."

It must be a grievance then, thought Nigel, not a bad liver. Major Keston went on hurriedly, as if apologetic for his curtness:

"Ought to have called before. Tell you the truth I was a bit scared. Your Mem's a celebrated woman, I mean. Wouldn't expect her to have much time for simple folk like us."

So that's it, thought Nigel: he resents our coming to his village—he's afraid the limelight will be diverted from him to Georgia.

"I don't think you'll find her very terrifying," he said equably.

They discussed the weather for a little. Then Major Keston intimated that one object of his visit was to touch them for a subscription to the village bell-ringers' fund. Nigel went over to his desk, switching on the light above it to look for the treasury notes that were generally kept loose in a pigeon-hole there. The pigeon-hole, however, was empty this evening, and Nigel started to go upstairs for the notecase he had left on his chest-of-drawers.

On the wall under the staircase hung a convex mirror. As he neared it, Nigel noticed the major's reflection. Major Keston was certainly a quick mover: already he was standing, though Nigel had not heard a sound behind him, close to the desk. The manikin in the mirror, as Nigel passed, half-raised its miniature, brilliant hand; then, as if thinking better of it, turned away and flashed silently back to the fireplace.

He might at least wait till I'm out of the room before he starts rifling my desk, thought Nigel, who was very, very seldom surprised by the vagaries of human nature. And I don't see why I should give him another opportunity.

Instead of going upstairs, he called out to Georgia to bring the notecase down with her. Presently she appeared, and Nigel introduced Major Keston. It always amused him to see her greeting strangers. She possessed an instinct, sharpened by her experience in strange places among strange peoples, for instantly reacting to the real nature of those she was meeting for the first time. It was not often that she took an immediate dislike to someone; but, when she did, it was always proved to be justified in the long run. On such occasions her physical sense of distaste, of repulsion, was so strong that she felt it must be written up in neon lights all over her face, and to conceal this she would assume a gushing, hostessy manner entirely foreign to her.

She was gushing now, as Nigel observed with secret amusement. And the leathery little man seemed to like it.

"I'm *so* glad you looked in, Major Keston. We've both been wanting to meet you properly, get to know you. We've heard so much about you in the village."

Georgia chattered away. The major visibly thawed. Presently he said:

"Hope you don't mind my mentioning it, Strangeways. I noticed you went to that desk over there for money. If I may say so, I shouldn't keep money there, not just at present. Desk too easily opened. Been a lot of burglaries around here lately—amateurish affairs, rather. That desk just the sort of thing the fella would make for."

"Thanks for the tip. I don't think it would pay any burglar to have a stab at us, though. My wife's a very light sleeper, and a first-class revolver-shot."

Georgia giggled nervously. "Yes, I have shot one or two people. In self-defence, of course." Which was in fact quite true.

Major Keston's pebbly little eyes flickered. He seemed momentarily at a loss. Then he said:

"I suppose you're quite handy with a gun, too, Strangeways? Have to be, in your job."

"My job?" Nigel stared at him blankly: he did not like it to be common property that he was a private detective; his name never appeared in the papers in connexion with any case he undertook, and he did not see how the major could have got on to it.

"Well, dash it, arresting murderers and so forth."

"Oh, I don't do any of that. I leave arrests to the police. I'm terrified of firearms," replied Nigel in his mimsiest voice.

Major Keston's glance was eloquent of contempt. The subject, however, seemed to have given him his cue. He proceeded to question them, with an effrontery that Nigel found unpleasantly dictatorial, as to why they had come to live in such a remote part of the country. Georgia chattered away enthusiastically about the beauties of Devonshire, the rewards of the simple life, her desire to get away from their rackety existence in London, and the rest of it. After a while, their visitor appeared to be satisfied, though Nigel could scarcely restrain himself from asking why they should need a permit before settling down in the major's village.

At last Major Keston rose to take his leave. As he did so, his eye lighted upon the desk. He exclaimed:

"God bless my soul! What's that there? I believe it's my locket. Yes, it is. Where ever did you find it? It's been missing since last spring."

Georgia explained. "I'm afraid we opened it. We thought it might give some clue to the owner. But there was nothing inside except an old photograph."

"Yes," said the major. His voice sounded subtly different to Nigel. "My mother, as a matter of fact."

Georgia's eyes opened wide. She paused a moment, then said quickly:

"Your mother? What a beautiful woman! We were immensely taken with her—weren't we, Nigel? I suppose she was quite young when this was done?"

"Yes. I believe so." The major went on gruffly, "Must've been. Remember her looking like that when I was a boy, coming to say goodnight to me before she went out to parties. All togged up, y'know. Hrr'm. Poor soul, she died when I was quite young. Consumption."

"Do you mind if I have just one more little look at her?" asked Georgia. Now why, Nigel wondered, has she gone all kittenish? Georgia opened the locket, took out the daguerreotype and strolled over to the fireplace to see it in a better light. The next moment she exclaimed, "Oh, how clumsy I am!" She had let the picture fall into the coal-scuttle. The major bent down politely to pick it up, but she was before him. She rescued it, and began rubbing it briskly with her handkerchief.

"I'm *so* sorry. There. I think she's all right now. I'm afraid the locket's been spoilt by lying in that ditch. Poor darling," Georgia burbled, "covered up with leaves like the Babes in the Wood. How glad you must be to get her back!"

The major's hand was indeed trembling with emotion as she put the locket into it. "Very grateful," he muttered. His eyes, shamefast yet still touched with suspicions, swivelled uneasily from Georgia to Nigel. All at once he barked, "A bird! That's what it must have been. A damned magpie."

"Stole it, you mean?" asked Nigel.

"That's right. A lot of the brutes up my way. Notice an old nest anywhere above the place you found it?"

Georgia shook her head. "There are a couple of trees there, though."

"Ah, that's it, depend upon it." The major seemed extraordinary relieved to have got to the root of the matter.

When the sound of his footsteps, stumping up the lane, had died away, Nigel took Georgia by her two wrists and shook her.

"Now why did you give that sickening display of ingenuousness, my sweet? And why did the helpless little woman deliberately drop the major's mother into the coal-scuttle?"

"Oh, Nigel, didn't you see? Whoever that beautiful lady may have been, *one person she couldn't possibly be is the major's mother.* That's why I dropped her, I didn't want the major to find out we'd opened her up, the paste you put on might look too fresh, that's why I rubbed in coal-dust well around the rim, he's an abominable creature and gave me gooseflesh, but not such a fool as he'd like us to think, so——"

"Here, one thing at a time," Nigel interrupted his wife's outburst. "Why couldn't she be the major's mother?"

"The corkscrew curls. That style of coiffure went out about 1850. Our mendacious major claims to have seen her like that as a child. Which would make him anything from eighty to a hundred years old today. It won't add up."

"Fancy-dress, perhaps?" Nigel suggested. "No, of course not; he gave the impression it was her normal appearance in the evening, going out to parties. Well, if she wasn't his mother, why was he so darned keen to get the locket back? Presumably the Union Jack with E.B. on it is the important thing. Yes, and at first he didn't want us to connect him with the locket at all. Hence the burglary scare."

"Don't talk in shorthand, darling."

Nigel told her what he had seen in the convex mirror. "When he noticed the locket lying on my desk, his first impulse was to grab it. He realized at once, however, that we might connect him with its disappearance. His next move was to hand us a local burglar—'amateurish' was a good touch: he meant to prepare our minds for a burglary. No doubt he intended to break in himself one of these dark nights, take the locket, and a few other things to cover up its loss——"

"Goodness! Time must hang heavily on their hands here if that's his idea of winter sports!"

"—but when I said you were a light sleeper, and you weighed in with that airy reminiscence about the people you'd bumped off—well, he thought better of it. So he invented his mother."

Georgia stared at him, her brow wrinkled. "But, Nigel, it's fantastic. I admit I didn't *like* Major Keston, but——"

"I noticed that." Nigel smiled absently. "You know, if it was his locket, and there's some secret attached to it, he'd surely not have slipped up over the daguerreotype. Therefore the locket must belong to someone else, someone he knows, and the major is desperately keen to lay his hands on it. What does that suggest?"

"Search me."

"Blackmail, my love. I really think I shall have to inquire a little further into these goings-on."

"Oh, Nigel," Georgia wailed. *"Must* you? Just when we're settling down, and——"

"Well, it won't affect you. Your job was over when you'd spotted the ringlets."

But, for once, Nigel was wildly, abysmally wrong.

Chapter 2

The Episode of the Misguided Tramps

"I think I'll pop down to the Green Lion and tap the fountain head," said Nigel the next evening. "If we go now, we'll probably find Harry alone: the boys don't start trooping in till seven o'clock generally."

" 'We'? Last night you said I'd done my part of the job."

"Oh, but you're dying to find out more about the mysterious major, now aren't you? You can just sit and wag your ears while I do the talking."

Five minutes later they were sitting in the bar of the Green Lion, toasting their feet at a blazing fire. Georgia, who had acquired a taste for the rough, West-country cider, together with a healthy respect for its potency, held a mug of it between her hands.

"Good luck, Harry," she said, taking a sip. The Green Lion was none of your fancy town pubs, all chromium and quick ones: here, you settled down on a hard bench for the evening, spinning out your modest pint or two to last three hours of deliberate drinking and even more deliberate conversation. Silence itself was sociable here. It reminded Georgia of a council of war she had once attended among the Melanesian islanders. After squatting completely mum for half an hour or so in the hut, the warriors had dispersed. Georgia had asked their chief when the council of war was to be held. "We've just finished," he replied.

Telepathy seemed to be the mode in the Green Lion, too, for Harry Luce suddenly broke the companionable silence with:

"I hear you've had a visit from Major Keston."

"News travels fast in Folyton."

"Oh, he were in here day before yesterday, wasting my time with a lot of daft questions about you. 'Why, damn *me,'* I says to en, 'if thee wants to know so much about them why don't thee go and ask them theself? 'Tis no concern of I,' I says. So he said he would."

"And you put two and two together? But I'm surprised at his coming in here. He told me he didn't drink."

An expression of righteous indignation came over Harry's thin, ferrety face. He flicked cigarette-ash off his waistcoat and spat volubly into the fire.

"No more he does. Stands at my bar twenty minutes by the clock and don't buy even a packet of Woodbines. 'Tis not right—not to my way of thinking."

"Pretty popular in the district, isn't he?"

"He is, and he isn't. He's in with the farmers, and the gentry calls up to Yarnold Farm quite a bit, so they do say. But he wants to rule the roost—he's too bossy for we down here. Mind *you,* when he comes first, us rings the joybells for en—as you might say—seeing his family used to be squires in Folyton——."

"I never realized that," Nigel interrupted. "I thought he was a newcomer."

"He was, and he wasn't," Harry replied deliberately. "The Kestons haven't lived here for two generations now, and Folyton House has been empty of late. Now what I wants to know, Mr. Strangeways and Madam, is this—why didn't he take Folyton House, if he wanted to set himself up as squire?"

"Couldn't afford it, perhaps."

"Why, damn *me,* he must have spent thousands rebuilding Yarnold Farm. He has the money, for certain. There's another thing, now. He used local labour for that job, but last year, when he wanted to add on another bit, he brought in a lot of foreigners to do it."

"Foreigners?"

"From London, or some such. Us didn't have no truck with they. 'Tweren't right, not to my way of thinking. Wonderful workshop he's built himself up there, so they do say. Wonderful man with his hands."

"We must walk over and have a look at it."

"Don't thee go by night then," said Harry, winking slyly at Georgia.

"Why ever not?"

"Has thee never heard of the ghoost up to Yarnold Cross? Thee'd best ask Joe here. None of us likes to go past the cross at night, do us, Joe?"

Joe Sweetbred, who during this conversation had taken his usual place by the fireside, poked the fire with his stick and poured out his cider, which had been warming in a saucepan there. He was a very old man and —to Georgia's eye—indistinguishable from one of those extras, dressed up to look like rustic ancients for a British quota film, who enliven the proceedings by bursting out every now and then into Somerset folksongs in perfect harmony and Portland Place accents. Joe's voice, however, failed to preserve the illusion. It was thickened by age, an almost unintelligible dialect, and what seemed to Georgia an all-time high in adenoidal growth.

"Yis, maaster, yis, 'tes right," Joe Sweetbred whined vivaciously. "Ghoost up tu Yaarnold Cross. I seen en. Heh-heh! Churning butter. Poor maid."

"Maybe she'm keeping herself warm," Harry suggested. "Her was dairymaid up to Yarnold Farm, see?—a hundred years ago, 'twould be. Her started making eyes at farmer, see? So farmer's wife——"

Joe chipped in—"Her took a stake, and her sharpened he, and her stuck he in maid's eyes. Maid rushes out of house, yowling fit to bust, and falls down girt well, poor soul, heh-heh. Now she'm walking up along at cross-roads. I seen en."

"They bricked up the well," Harry added, "but naught went right for they after that. They left the farm and it fell down in ruins. So 'twas."

"Has any one seen this ghost lately?" Georgia inquired.

"Young Henry Tule, he seen 'en. He was courting and he went up over the cross one night. That was after Major Keston came, weren't it, Joe? Came fair busting down the hill on his bike. 'I seen en,' he yells. So white as a sheet he was. Mind *you,* young Henry's a bit simple. Did you ever hear about the time he got into the tub?"

"No."

"Well, this young Tule, he was feeling poorly one day. So he goes to the doctor, and then he comes home and eats a hell of a great dinner. After dinner he goes out into the yard, and presently his mother hears him calling. Out she pops, and finds young Henry sitting stark naked in a tub of water. 'What's thee doing in tub?' says she. 'Never thee mind, Mum,' he says, 'fetch out thic bottle the doctor gave I.' 'Is thee gone daft?' says she. 'Hell,' says he, 'will thee fetch thic bottle! Doctor told I to take medicine three times a day, after meals, in water.' In water, see?—so he gets into tub. True as I'm standing here. Damn *me,* it was a laugh. Young Henry's a most simple chap, no doubt of it."

When Harry got launched on the local folklore, there was no holding him. After a little, since the subject of Major Keston seemed to be exhausted, Georgia and Nigel started home.

"I wish I could remember—I'm sure I've heard something about the major before," said Georgia. "Where did he come from? It's queer Harry not saying anything about that, considering he's a sort of walking Who's Who for the neighbourhood."

"Let's go up to Yarnold Farm tomorrow and ask him. He seems to have been inquisitive enough about us. About time we had a return match."

So the next afternoon saw them walking up the lane that led to Yarnold Cross. At the top of the hill, it veered to the right and stretched in front of them along the ridge. Already the sky beyond held that possessed and luminous look which tells the traveller he is nearing the sea. Instinctively, though they were breathing hard from the sharp climb, they quickened their pace—Nigel walking with his ungainly, ostrich stride, Georgia moving with the beauty and tireless swing of an athlete. A quarter of a mile brought them to the cross. Here they paused for a moment while Georgia took their bearings. Ahead, the lane dodged downhill in a series of steep, narrow turns to the main road which swung inland here from the coast. To their left, another lane wandered off towards the Exeter road, which farther west passed through their own village. The right-hand road, little better than a stony track, dropped down sharply into the combe where Yarnold Farm was situated. Yarnold Cross was the end of this inland promontory, from which the brown and green hills fall away on three sides. Hardly aware that she was doing so, Georgia drew a sketch-map of the place in her mind's eye. Then they turned right, and in a couple of minutes, heralded by a loud barking of dogs, were standing outside Major Keston's door.

While they waited for their ring to be answered, they had ample leisure to look around them. Some derelict out-buildings were the only survival of the old Yarnold Farm that they could see. The new house, built of brick and roofed with green tiles, would have graced a high-class, residential suburb: in this desolate spot, however, it looked not so much pretentious as absurd—like a poster advertising a luxury hotel in some remote country station. The suburban illusion stretched as far as the front lawn, which was plotted out primly with flowerbeds and concrete paths: beyond these it faded out into a wilderness of unkempt hedges and rank pasture. The house stood, like a wealthy urban parvenu in plus fours, staring both patronizingly and ignorantly at the combe that rolled away to the south, turning its back on the wooded slopes protecting it to the east and north.

"Do you think he's out?" asked Nigel.

"Ring again. I say, where d'you suppose the well is—the one the poor maid fell into, heh-heh?"

"Round at the back somewhere, I expect."

At this moment, the door was opened by a tall, bleak-faced woman, formidable enough—Georgia thought—to be a reincarnation of the farmer's wife who had sharpened a stake and given that pretty dairymaid one in the eye. Surveying them for a moment, with a faintly puzzled expression, she said:

"You're wanting Major Keston? Step this way. You're new here, aren't you?"

Involuntarily Georgia glanced down at her trim, green Harris-tweed suit. What was wrong with it? Why should the woman be eyeing it so curiously? And "you're new here" was surely a peculiar conversational gambit? She had no time to speculate on these questions for they were shown into an unexpectedly attractive room, cheerful with brick fireplace, log fire and bright linen curtains. A strangely feminine room, thought Georgia, which it was difficult to connect with the major or his ramrod-backed housekeeper. Nigel was already on the prowl, poking his nose into the shelf of novels, the mantelpiece ornaments, the pile of Victorian ballads on the upright piano. "This," he muttered to himself, "is a remarkably noncommittal room. Not so much *rus in urbe* as *suburbia in rure.*"

"Hallo, hallo!" Major Keston entered, briskly rubbing his hands. "Come to see my little grey home in the west? Had tea? No? Good, I'll see what Mrs. Raikes can rake up, what?"

Georgia and Nigel glanced at each other, stunned by this explosion of affability. What's come over the man, Georgia asked herself, as he popped up and down, pressing cakes on her, poking the fire, rearranging the screen at her back? Have I made a hit? Or are these preliminary moves in the blackmail game? No, that's just Nigel's professional suspiciousness. But there is something weaselly about Major Keston—and a weasel seeking to ingratiate itself is certainly a bit weird.

Nigel was saying, "You've been out east, haven't you, Major?"

"Oh, yes. Rather. Then I got a legacy, sent in my papers, came back to England. My family used to live here, at the Manor, y'know."

Did it all come a little too pat? Georgia wondered. The major's reply had been on the surface quite open, yet it had given remarkably little away. Nigel threw her a significant glance: he wanted her to return his lead.

"Whereabouts were you stationed?" she asked. "I've knocked about in the east myself quite a bit."

Had she imagined it, or did a certain wariness come into his face—a suggestion of the weasel, nose quivering, snuffing danger? He said:

"India. I was in the police, actually. Well, what about having a look round my little place?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to. You've made it awfully comfortable." Georgia smiled at him charmingly. Nothing in her attentive, brown face betrayed the fact that she had just remembered what it was she had heard about Major Keston.

He showed them round with the rather perfunctory air of a house-agent conducting a pair of unpromising clients. Dining-room, kitchen, study: four or five bedrooms upstairs. Major Keston flung open doors, switched on lights, allowed them a glance and then hustled them on to the next room. It was a large house for so small a household. When they were down in the hall again, Major Keston paused meaningly. He evidently was hinting that it was time for them to go, but Nigel somehow failed to take the hint.

"I hear you've a wonderful workshop," he said. "Harry Luce told us."

"Not so bad. Need it, y'know, living in a place like this. The locals are a pretty lazy, inefficient lot. Show you over some time, if you're interested. Bit dark now."

Nigel glanced at his wife again. The sympathy between them was so perfect that she understood at once what he wanted. She drifted into the drawing-room, on the pretext of fetching her gloves, and began to chatter again. Their host became visibly more fidgety. At last he said:

"Well, don't want to speed the parting guest and all that. But I'm going out to dinner tonight. Black tie affair. Got to change."

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry. Look, Nigel, it's nearly six o'clock." Georgia indicated the clock on the mantelpiece with every appearance of horror and contrition. "How thoughtless of us. The time has gone so quickly. Now we really must be off. A charming house, Major Keston."

When they were out of earshot of the charming house, Nigel took her arm. "Your delaying tactics were magnificent, my sweet. I thought he was itching to be rid of us, and I wanted to make quite sure. Now why?"

"Perhaps, he's really got a dinner date. I say, I remembered—when he said he was in the Indian Police. There was some scandal: hushed up for reasons of policy, I believe. He ordered his men to fire on a crowd and several women were killed. They whitewashed him officially, but he was told privately that he'd better resign."

"That accounts for the permanent grievance stamped on his unlovely features."

There was a lot more Georgia wanted to ask. But at this moment they reached Yarnold Cross and were about to turn left when they heard footsteps approaching along the road opposite. Nigel drew her quickly into the shadow of the deep hedge. Presently two men appeared, shuffled over the cross-roads and went down the lane leading to Yarnold Farm. There was still enough light in the sky to see that they were tramps.

"I always thought tramps kept to the main roads," whispered Georgia.

"So they do. Unless— Let's wait a few minutes."

They waited a quarter of an hour. The tramps had not returned. "They can't have gone farther on. That lane peters out at Major Keston's house, doesn't it?" said Nigel. "And I shouldn't have thought the major was exactly a person who keeps open house for tramps. Look here, do you mind a bit of a walk?"

He took her arm again, and they went down the eastward lane along which the two men had come. Georgia knew better than to ask Nigel what he had in mind. There was a strain of secretiveness about him, which made him keep a theory to himself till he had proved it; and there was also his boyish love of springing a surprise on you.

A mile further on the lane joined the main road. "I stopped, and I looked, and I listened," quoted Nigel. "Hear any one coming? No? Then lend me your torch."

The round of light glanced about like a dancing jellyfish as Nigel moved up and down the road-junction. At last it came to rest on a gate in the hedge. "Look at this," he said.

There was a chalk sign on the gate-post. "That's a tramp's sign," Nigel said. "They leave them about—information as to what houses keep fierce dogs, or can be relied on for a square meal, and so on."

"Well, that explains why those two men turned off the main road here. Major Keston must have a soft spot in him for tramps."

"Oh, dear me, no. You see, I happen to know this particular sign means 'Don't come this way. Nothing for you.' So what?"

Georgia gasped. Her quick mind flashed the implications. Major Keston's was the only house along that road, so the sign must refer to it. But the tramps would never have left the main road unless they were sure of hospitality in that direction. And the sign told them plainly they would not get it. Therefore they were not bona-fide tramps. Then why on earth should——

Nigel broke into her thoughts with, "You see what it means. It's possible even that they chalked that sign themselves, to stop any real tramps coming up this way. It looks as if the major and his misguided friends wanted to be alone."

"Possibly the boys are celebrating the Black Mass tonight. But why go to all this trouble? Why not roll up in expensive cars?"

"I haven't the foggiest. What about another walk after dinner?"

Night keeps her old mysteries in the country. There are dark hints in the air: a chilling breath rises from the ancient earth and lifts the hair on your neck: owls shriek and flit as if the furtive darkness itself had grown wings and found its voice. The lighted window beckons you to hurry home, and once you are inside the night draws back baffled. Glancing at Nigel across the dinner table, Georgia could no longer believe in the little shudder of premonition that had passed over her spirit, like a cat's-paw, when he suggested they should go up to Yarnold Farm tonight. How many nights have I slept out in the jungle, in deserts, in friendless and unchancy places, she reminded herself, and yet the idea of a starlit walk in the heart of England made me uneasy. It's absurd. The whole thing's fantastic. "What came ye out for to see?"—a retired major of Indian Police, a respectable, commonplace citizen, whom—on the strength of a locket and a couple of tramps—we are suspecting of some nameless villainy. Serve us right if we catch nothing but a chill.

The more she thought of it, the less rational their conduct appeared. Nigel was buried in a book, the image of a placid householder taking his ease. The electric light shone mildly down through its parchment shade on a scene of domesticity—on two harmless-looking people, she said to herself, who harbour the most verminous, noisome and unneighbourly thoughts. Nigel looked at his wrist watch. "Ten-thirty," he said. "We'd better be trotting along. I should wrap up well, if I were you."

"And bring my sub-machine-gun?" she replied.

"I'm afraid you're not taking this seriously." Nigel was smiling quizzically at her; but at last she realized, with mingled excitement and exasperation, that he himself was taking it very seriously indeed.

The sky, when they trudged up the lane once more, was pricked out with frosty stars. A sliver of new moon hung over their shoulders, and the earth gleamed faintly like an old mirror. Every now and then a breath of wind stirred the bare boughs, as though the earth, turning over in her sleep, had sighed. Their feet on the lane's rough surface seemed to shatter and grind the silence into a thousand harsh fragments. Now they had reached the summit. They moved quicker, more silently now. Beyond the next curve lay Yarnold Cross—and a thing that, though Georgia might have expected it, took her utterly by surprise. Rounding the bend, they saw, a bare fifty yards in front, the ghost of Yarnold Cross. It stood where the four roads met, a tall figure, light playing over the arms that moved in a weary effort, up and down, up and down. A sound came out of its mouth—a kind of howling shudder, which was answered at once by

Georgia's screams and the panic padding of their feet as they raced back along the lane.

At a safe distance they stopped. "Blast!" panted Nigel, "I should have thought of that. It's a perfect place for them to post a sentry—and that legend to back it up. Well, it shows they've got some fun and games going on. You showed great presence of mind screaming like that. Let's hope they think we're a pair of village swains and they've scared us off for good."

"Sh. Just listen a moment. Why aren't Major Keston's dogs barking? With all the shindy we kicked up——"

"They're being silenced. Yes. It must mean that people are moving about down there tonight, and he doesn't want any one to know it. We'd better make a detour. Could you find your way to that wood overlooking the house?"

Georgia's wonderful eye for country, and the map she had made in her head, now came in useful. Climbing a gate, they struck off across the dark upland, the turf silent beneath their feet. It was a difficult journey, because they dared not break through the hedges that stood in their path and had to find gates or gaps through which they could pass noiselessly. At last a deeper bulk of gloom showed up in the darkness before them—the wood that sloped down to Yarnold Farm from the north. When they reached its edge, Georgia gripped Nigel's wrist and drew him close beside her.

"I'd better go ahead by myself now," she whispered. "You wouldn't be able to see much in the dark, and it's going to be a job getting through this wood quietly."

It was typical, both of Nigel and the relationship between them, that he attempted to protest. He knew that she could find her way about in the dark like a cat, whereas he himself would probably resemble a squadron of tanks if he tried to penetrate this tangle of trees and bushes. "Very well. Take care of yourself," he said. "I'll expect you when I see you. I'll just sit here and think."

The next moment Georgia was gone, slipping like a shadow into the wood. A faint swishing of boughs was all that marked her progress, and soon that noise too faded out. Nigel set his mind to work on the strange problem which had brought them here. It was like trying to reconstruct the anatomy of some prehistoric monster, with only a few scattered bones to guide him. The original theory of blackmail could surely be counted out. Drawing upon his phenomenally accurate memory, Nigel set out the pieces of the puzzle: (i) the locket, (ii) Major Keston's inquisitiveness,

(iii) the position of Yarnold Farm, its remoteness from other dwellings, its proximity to the coastal road and the sea, (iv) what Harry had told him about the major, and the scandal that had compelled him to resign from the Indian Police, (v) Major Keston's eagerness to get them out of the house this evening, taken in conjunction with the arrival of the bogus tramps. How many more "tramps" might have been making their anonymous way to Yarnold Farm today? (vi) the "ghost" at the cross, which had begun to appear again after the major's arrival in Folyton.

So absorbed was Nigel in his problem that only his subconscious mind noted, some time later, the hum of a lorry distantly carried over from the direction of the coast, approaching, stopping somewhere in the valley below. Minutes after the lorry's hum had ceased, Nigel remembered that he had heard it. "So that's it," he muttered. "No, it's grotesquely improbable. But what else could explain it all?" With increasing anxiety now, he awaited his wife's return.

Meanwhile Georgia had worked her way patiently through the wood, and looked down on the shadowy bulk of Yarnold Farm, where a light still burning in some downstairs room threw a patch of white, like frost, on to the front lawn. Presently a figure was standing in this patch, back turned to her, staring towards the downland that divided Yarnold Farm from the sea. The figure returned to the house, and for what seemed an age no sound or movement came. Her ear, trained to danger, could detect nothing which suggested that the alarm given by the ghost-sentry had been followed up. Excitement ebbing from her, the cold beginning to strike through the layers of thick clothes she had put on, she felt the whole thing must be a false alarm too. The ghost was some village lad playing the goat, the figure down below had been just the major taking a breath of fresh air before turning in for the night. At this moment, as if to clinch her disappointment, the light in Yarnold Farm went out.

Georgia was tenacious, though. Some unlikely event might still happen, and she was determined to wait on the off-chance. If she had known what to look for, she might have prowled down closer to the house, in spite of Nigel's insistence that she should not run any risk of being seen. For half an hour she stayed there, leaning her back against a fir. At last something broke the quiet innocence of the night—a sound innocent enough in itself, the distant hum of a lorry. Idly, Georgia listened to it. Then she stiffened. The lorry, surely, was not passing along the main road. Its sound came from straight ahead, from the direction of the sea. But that was only the road that led to Cathole Cove, she remembered. What was a lorry doing, travelling from the cove at this time of night?

A few minutes later Georgia slumped back disappointedly. She had expected the lorry, on reaching the main road, to cross over and attempt the corkscrew lane which led up to Yarnold Cross. Instead, she saw its lights flash out, and it had turned left along the main road, which, just beyond this point, curved in towards Major Keston's land. "Damn! All this for nothing. It'd just lost its way or something. I suppose there was some fold of the ground that prevented me seeing its lights," she thought. She was so annoyed with herself, Nigel, the whole set-up, it took her several seconds to realize that the whine of the lorry's engine had stopped.

In a moment, flitting like a tawny owl, she was off down the hillside. Making a wide sweep to keep away from the house, she gradually neared the main road. Still she could see nothing but a vague glow from the lorry's lamps. She must get nearer, she must. Here was a lofty, tangled hedge a boundary of the major's property, that led down to the road. Keeping in its cover, she advanced step by step. At last the road gleamed palely before her. She wriggled down silently into the ditch that ran beside the hedge. She parted the hedge-growth.

There was the lorry, drawn in at the side of the road, the driver hunched up in his cabin as if asleep. Well, he might be asleep, but there were others who most certainly were not—ragged, tramplike men, half a dozen or more of them, who were lifting wooden cases out of the back of the lorry, and carrying them through the gate into Major Keston's paddock. The cases seemed very heavy for their size: it took one man at each end to lift them. While she watched, the phantom glow of a car's headlights showed up in the distance. Someone must have been on the lookout. Instantly the backboard of the lorry was fastened up, the ragged men scattered away behind the road hedge, and the belated motorist when he passed saw nothing more noteworthy than a long-distance lorry drawn up at the roadside, its driver taking a nap. The next minute the men were at it again, working with a speed and orderly discipline that, contrasted with their ragged guise, gave the scene an incongruous and nightmare quality. It could not have been much more than ten minutes before the lorry, unloaded, ground off again into the night.

Chapter 3

The Episode of the Detective's Uncle

". . . And you say these cases looked heavy?"

"Well, it took a couple of the ragged rascals to tote each of them," Georgia replied.

Sir John Strangeways raised one bushy eyebrow at his nephew. "That about settles it, I think," he said.

The three of them were sitting in the flat which Nigel and Georgia had kept as a *pied à terre* for their visits to London. It was three days after the night-manoeuvres at Yarnold Farm. On the following morning, Nigel had gone up to town, leaving Georgia to consume her own curiosity and impatience as best she could. Later he had rung up asking her to follow him, but had firmly rung off when Georgia began to ask questions. Even after her arrival he would say nothing, and the subdued excitement which she sensed beneath his calm had worked her up into a high fever of curiosity. Then, this evening, his uncle had turned up and made her repeat exactly what she had seen from behind that hedge; and, in the very act of repeating it, she saw light.

"And now," she said, grinning mischievously at Sir John, "perhaps the two clams will open up. Or shall we just see if there isn't a masked man outside with his ear clamped to the keyhole?"

She stalked with exaggerated stealth to the door and flung it dramatically open. A broad, mackintosh-clad back confronted her.

"Oh!" she cried, slamming the door, "there—there *is* a m-man there!"

"Yes," said Sir John. "He's one of my men, as a matter of fact."

Georgia sat down rather suddenly, and gaped at him in bewilderment. Sir John Strangeways looked less like an official personage than one could believe possible. Curled up in the deep arm-chair, he resembled an intelligent, shaggy-haired terrier. "Inoffensive" seemed the best word to sum him up. Whenever Georgia set eyes on that draggled, sandy moustache of his, the shapeless, drab over-coat, the corn-cob pipe that fumed like Gehenna, she received once again the illusion that here was a suburban householder—a retired grocer, say—who had just returned from pottering about in his garden, thrown off his gardening-gloves, and settled down to listen to a talk by Mr. Middleton. It needed a positive physical effort to remind herself that Sir John was in fact head of the C. Branch of Scotland Yard. Only when you noticed his eyes—a deeper blue than Nigel's, far-sighted, dreamy, suddenly focussing into alert interest or quizzing you with a humour that drew a network of wrinkles at their corners—did you begin to perceive his quality.

"Well, anyway," said Georgia, recovering herself, "I know what it's all about."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Sir John removed the pipe from between his discoloured teeth and tickled his ear with its stem.

"Yes, I do. Smuggling."

There was a short pause.

"Smuggling? Smuggling what?"

"Oh, I don't know. What do people smuggle nowadays? Silk?—no, the cases were too heavy. Dope?—no, too big. Brandy perhaps; that must be it."

"Why not—er—machine-guns?"

Georgia giggled. "Why not? Or howitzers. Or tanks."

"No, machine-guns will do," said Sir John, so seriously that she half-believed he could not be pulling her leg after all.

"Well, I know we're going in for rearmament, but it does seem to me rather a roundabout way to do it," she said.

"Now, if you'll stop chattering, I'll tell you something," Sir John replied. He pointed his pipe stem at the door. "You'll realize that man is not outside there for fun. This has to be confidential. Do you remember the Cagoulards in France?"

"The Hooded Men? Yes, I remember vaguely—a few years ago——"

"It was a conspiracy to overthrow the Popular Front government and set up a Fascist dictatorship in France, aided, it was alleged, by arms and money from two European powers. Arms dumps were discovered in Paris and other big cities, plans for kidnapping ministers and occupying strategic points. It nearly came off. None of your comic-opera plots—that one was. I advise you to read it up."

"But—but you're not suggesting?—not in England?"

"That's what they all say," Sir John remarked drily. "I suppose you won't take my word for it, so I'll have to give you a short political lecture."

Georgia never forgot the scene, though the dramatic events that were to follow it might well have chased it out of her head: the distant surge of traffic, a newsboy crying like a seagull in the street below, Nigel standing by the mantelpiece with an air of polite inattention that did not for a moment deceive her, and Sir John mildly gesturing with his pipe stem—outlining in his most matter-of-fact voice a theory which, from any other mouth, would have seemed as incredible as one of Scheherezade's fantasies.

"So there it is," he concluded. "The gist of it is that this conspiracy is already under way, and we've got little to work on and very little time to work in."

Stumping over to the fireplace, he shook out his pipe.

Georgia set her bewildered mind to grasp the implications of what he had said. She had a queer feeling that they had just come through an earthquake which had shaken down the wall of the house, tumbled down all the houses around, left her staring out at a shattered, unfamiliar prospect. Like the footsteps of a rescue squad, his phrases echoed hollow and sombre in her head. Even now, it took an effort to make sense of them. A General Election before long. An all-party government coming into power which would reverse the policy of appeasement, stand up to the European dictators. The growing indignation among the British people against being bluffed and bullied into concessions. And, on the other hand, a conspiracy organized by the friends of Fascism in the country to discredit this government and overthrow it by armed force—the last, desperate throw of those who saw the future slipping out of their hands.

"But I don't see—" Georgia said weakly. "You mean, Major Keston is one of them?"

"I'll come to that in a minute. My department and the Secret Service have had wind of this underground movement for some time. But we're badly handicapped. In the first place, there's any amount of money behind it—just as the rich families in France were behind the Cagoulards: we don't know who they may have bought over, in the police, the army, the Civil Service. We don't know"—Sir John's sober voice set her nerves quivering—"*we don't know who we can trust.* The other thing is—we don't know who the leaders are: we've got on to some of the subordinates, they're being watched, but so far they've given us no lead to the people at the top. I'll tell you frankly, we've not even got a suspicion. A few months ago, for instance, we found an arms dump beneath an empty house in Maida Vale. At first we assumed it was left-over from the I.R.A. bombings in 1939. That's what they intended us to think. Oh, yes, we even had the last tenant of the house—when we'd rounded him up—admitting it, producing evidence that he was a member of the I.R.A.

We'd not have thought twice about it if we hadn't discovered that the bombs were of German manufacture, and if the chap hadn't been a touch too eager to confess his association with the I.R.A. There've been other things, too. They're a clever lot, wonderfully organized—their organization must be in watertight compartments. You break through into one, but you're still very far away from the centre."

After a long pause, Georgia asked him point-blank, "Why are you telling me all this?"

Sir John Strangeways glanced up from the bowl of the pipe he was lighting—one of those placid, homely glances which so endeared him to her and seemed to make dream-nonsense of everything he had been saying.

"Have you ever heard of the English Banner?" he inquired with apparent irrelevance.

"No. English Banner? What's—? Oh, E.B. The E.B. printed on the flag we found in that locket?"

"Holed out in one. The English Banner is a queer sort of semi-mystical society, which flourishes mainly in country districts. They believe in the natural aristocracy of the landowning class, and of course they let in a few selected hangers-on—gamekeepers and the like—to give the thing a more catholic appearance. The idea," Sir John added drily, "is that they are really the best people in the country and therefore ought to be its rulers. They're quite harmless."

"But if they're harmless——"

"The point is that they wrap themselves in mystery as well as in mysticism. They're a secret association—a free-masonry without aprons and lodges. Now just consider: if you wanted a good cover for a *dangerous* secret organization, what could you find better than a *harmless* ditto. Take smuggling; a false bottom to your suitcase which is fairly easily disclosed: nothing in it: let off with a caution: but, beneath that, another false bottom. Which of course brings us to your military friend."

"Has Major Keston a false bottom?" Georgia asked dazedly. "Or two false bottoms? You're getting me a bit groggy."

Sir John grinned at her. "Major Keston is a man with a grudge and considerable organizing talent. As you know, he was politely sacked from the Indian Police. He's just the kind of material the big people in this movement can use. Don't underestimate him and his like. They're probably quite sincere. Nothing easier than to turn a personal grievance the other way up and see it as patriotism." He glanced at Georgia a little guiltily: there were few things Sir John Strangeways more disliked than to be caught making generalizations. Georgia, however, was only concerned with the truth of what he had said.

"I quite see that," she replied. "But have you any evidence for connecting——?"

"Oh, yes." Like his nephew, Sir John had an uncanny gift of anticipating one's argument. "The really interesting thing is that the disk you found in the locket—the Union Jack with E.B. on it—is not one of the English Banner's properties. We've got one or two people inside the English Banner, just to see they're keeping out of mischief, and I asked about it when Nigel came along with his story. They report that there is no such membership token. You see the implication? It means that this token is only in use among an inner circle of the E.B. But, if the inner circle is as harmless as the rest of the organization, why don't the ordinary members know about it?"

"What are the disks for, then?"

"I suggest they are the means of identification by which the leaders of this conspiracy make themselves known, when necessary, to its subordinate officers. That's only a guess, of course. But, if one of the disks was seen by the wrong person, its owner could always in the last resort explain it away by a reference to the English Banner. That's the advantage of working under cover of a semi-secret organization."

"It all sounds absurdly melodramatic to me."

"Conspiracies *are* melodramatic, my dear, especially when they're made by rich people with too much money and time on their hands. Look at the Cagoulards conferring together in white hoods. It doesn't necessarily stop them being efficient, though. Wish it did. I'm worried to death about this, and I don't mind saying so."

"Dear Uncle John! I'm sure they'd be much more worried if they knew you were sitting on their tail. . . . But honestly, I can't believe it yet. What proof on earth have you that Major Keston was smuggling arms, for instance?"

"Better ask Nigel. He worked it out. Here, boy, give me something to drink: I've talked myself dry."

Nigel poured out drinks for them. As he talked, he moved about the room, setting down his own glass precariously on the extreme edge of any piece of furniture that was handy. Georgia had never become quite used to this unnerving habit of his: this evening, however, what he had to say kept her mind off household breakages.

"The tramps gave me the clue," he began with unusual abruptness. "Obviously the major was smuggling something. Well, you don't smuggle any of the ordinary things—silk, drugs and so on—in heavy cases. It might conceivably have been liquor of some sort. But, if so, why drag a lot of bogus tramps into it? Why *tramps?*—that's what kept tapping on my bump of curiosity. As you remarked, Georgia, why shouldn't the major's assistants roll up in expensive cars?—or plain vans at the least? Of course, there was only one explanation."

"Of *course,*" said Georgia acidly. "Don't stand there leering at me as if I was a half-wit village maiden."

"The only reason why people should disguise themselves as tramps and plod all the way to Yarnold Farm is that they were local people who otherwise might easily be recognized and couldn't afford to be recognized. Now one can't imagine a set of local bigwigs engaged in running liquor on that scale: unfortunately, the political situation being what it is, one can only too easily imagine them running arms. No doubt they've been convinced that the next government will be bright Red, take all their possessions away and murder them in their beds. The tramp disguise safeguarded them in several ways. When you see a tramp, you think of milestones, don't you—you naturally assume that he has no home and comes from a distance."

"But why couldn't the major have just invited them to a dinner-party that night, all apparently open and above board?"

"Because, if anything happened to the consignment of arms on the way, if any suspicion arose about the transactions of that night—and you know how rumours do fly in the country—they'd all be in the cart. Besides, disguise is second nature to those sort of people where anything touching their respectability is concerned. Their conscience, so to speak, allows them to betray their country in white hoods but not in dinner-jackets."

"If they were so terrified of being recognized, why didn't they get a gang of weight-lifters from somewhere else?"

"It's not so easy to import a gang of strangers into a remote country place without rousing talk. In fact, it's next door to impossible. Major Keston had done it once, you remember, when he was building an 'addition to his house' as Harry called it. I bet that addition was his workshop and a cosy underground chamber—the workmen were probably told it was for a wine-cellar—where the arms could be stored. There is also the point that this conspiracy is decentralized—in watertight compartments, Uncle John called it. The Keston Regional, if I may so refer to the major's little set-up, does all its own work as far as possible; thus, if an accident should happen, the damage would be localized, and no lead given to other centres of the plot."

"They certainly must have packets of money behind them, building that house and everything."

"Yes. That's another significant point. There's not much doubt where Major Keston's 'legacy' came from. Yarnold Farm was chosen for its strategic position, near the sea, remote from other dwellings. Cathole Cove is a deserted place, like the downs above it. A cargo of arms could easily be landed there, loaded on to the lorry by the people who brought them, unloaded by the major's chaps. If any one came across the lorry-driver on the road to Cathole Cove, he could say he'd been half asleep and taken the wrong fork off the main road. But the chances were a thousand to one against it at that time of night. The lorry's numberplates were false ones, by the way, Georgia, so we've got no further in that direction. No doubt the locket belongs to one of the leaders of the conspiracy, who visited Yarnold Farm last year to make arrangements, and had it pinched somehow by a magpie. Maybe he was sunbathing. I wonder would that give us a clue," said Nigel dreamily.

"I should have thought the simplest thing would be to get a posse and burst into the major's cellarage."

"No, no," said Sir John briskly. "Don't want to put 'em on their guard yet. Just stop 'em landing any more arms for the present."

"And how do you propose to do that? Lay a minefield in Cathole Cove?"

Sir John's eyes twinkled. "No need for anything so drastic. I've tipped off Jimmie Blair—you know the fellow, he's doing that 'Some Spooks I Have Met' series for the *Daily Post.* He'll write up the Yarnold Cross ghost, and that'll bring a horde of sightseers and psychic researchers up to the farm. They'll have to withdraw their sentry till it blows over—and by that time——"

Sir John broke off. Georgia became aware of a certain tension in the air. Nigel and his uncle studiously refrained from looking at each other. They were like two children, she thought, who share a guilty secret: it was as if, about to spring some practical joke upon her, they were not sure how she would take it. When Sir John spoke again, however, his words seemed innocent enough.

"Our real problem is to find out who the leaders of this movement are. The smaller fry can take care of themselves for the present. Young Nigel has an idea." His voice trailed off.

"It's entirely theoretical, of course," said Nigel. "But here it is, for what it's worth. Granted this movement plans to set up some kind of dictatorship in Britain. Now, if there's one thing the British people wouldn't stand for, it's dictatorship by any of the ordinary politicians. No doubt the conspirators mean to work up a state of crisis, lawlessness, bloodshed and the rest, which will justify the Strong Hand at the Helm. Temporarily. We'd not submit to it once the trouble had been cleared up, *unless* the Strong Hand was someone of national popularity—not as a politician, but as, well, as a chap.

"There are a few people in the country who have caught the popular imagination—the Englishman still has a sneaking affection for the highly coloured, dynamic, adventurer-type—we're descendants of Drake, after all. If the conspirators are as clever as we believe them to be, they'll have chosen someone who can appeal to the ordinary Englishman's romanticism and hero-worship."

"Yes," murmured Georgia, "there's something in that. The inspired amateur. It's part of our national romanticism to trust the amateur rather than the professional. But how do we find him?"

The tension grew again. The whole room seemed to be holding its breath. Nigel fidgeted with the black wooden horse that Georgia had brought back from Africa. Sir John was filling his pipe as meticulously as though he were filing official papers. At last he looked up and said briskly:

"We want you to take a hand, my dear."

"Me? But I don't—why not Nigel?"

Sir John went on as if she had not spoken. "You're the only one of us, except for Nigel, who has seen the picture in the locket, and that picture is our sole clue. You have the entrée into fashionable society, and it's somewhere among the rich families that we've got to look for the centre of the movement. Also—I'll be quite frank with you—you're a bit of a legend in the country yourself: therefore this movement would be glad to make use of you, and equally you'll be excellent propaganda *against* it when the time comes for a showdown."

" 'Conspiracy foiled by famous woman-explorer.' Boy what a story!" exclaimed Nigel.

Sir John brushed it aside with an irritable gesture. "The reason Nigel has to keep out of this is obvious. He's my nephew, and his connexion with the police is known. That's why Major Keston was so inquisitive. They'd never trust Nigel."

"But the same applies to me. I'm married to Nigel, aren't I?"

"The idea," said Sir John, calmly puffing away at his pipe, "is that you should not be married. Arrange a separation—not a legal one, of course—just drop a hint to the gossip-writers that you've decided to separate: they'll do the rest."

So that's it, thought Georgia, speechless with surprise and indignation. So that's what their little game was leading up to!

"Have I got this right?" she asked, when at last she had recovered her voice. "You have the almighty nerve to suggest that I should separate from Nigel, create a scandal, not see him for months and months, while I go off on a wild-goose chase after some anonymous individual who probably doesn't exist except in your over-heated imagination? You're asking me to——"

"I'm asking you to do it for England." Sir John's voice was as flat as if he had merely asked her to go out and buy him a packet of pipe cleaners, and this gave an extraordinary conviction to the phrase. Damn him, thought Georgia, why does he make it so difficult for me to refuse? If he'd tried to cajole or bluff me into it, or said one more word about England my England, I'd have dealt with him easily enough. But he just sits there, looking like a worried but sensible small boy, and puts it out as a business proposition.

She turned impulsively towards Nigel. He was leaning against the mantelpiece; the smile he gave her was tender but absolutely noncommittal. She might have known that he would make no attempt to influence her, one way or the other. For a moment her heart rebelled against this: just for once couldn't he make a decision for her? No, it was not his way—or hers.

Sir John called her over to the window. One hand round her shoulders, he pointed up the street. It was the rush hour. A hundred yards away she could see the crowds hurrying home along the main thoroughfare. Typists, shop-assistants, business girls, tired yet moving with a gallant swing. She knew instinctively what Sir John wanted her to see there. His words only echoed what her own heart was telling her.

"Look at them," he said quietly. He might have been asking her to admire his roses. "They're not a bad lot, are they? Silly, vain, pert, ignorant, vulgar—some of them. But they've a grace of their own, haven't they? They've youth and independence and courage. They're England. And you know what the other side says—'Woman is for the recreation of the warrior'—'Woman's place is in the kitchen'—all the rest of that neanderthal tommyrot. That's what would happen, though. No young man to meet her outside the cinema tonight. He's got a date with a sadist stormtrooper in a concentration camp. That'll spoil him for her." Sir John squeezed her shoulder, and his hand dropped to his side. "You can't let that happen," he said.

"But I can't stop it either," she cried incoherently. "It's not my line. You're asking too much. I——"

"Well, think it over. A day or two won't make much difference. Good-bye for the present." Sir John had taken up his shabby hat and his ash stick, and was gone before she had time to say a word. She hardly knew, now, what that word would have been. His homely, reassuring presence withdrawn, the whole business seemed infinitely more grotesque, yet somehow more inescapable too, like a madman's delusion.

"Nigel," she said, going swiftly across to her husband, holding him by the wrists, "what am I to do?"

"I should take it on. It wouldn't be for long. It's worth doing."

But even then Georgia could not quite make up her mind. "Why did you have to start all this, just when I was settling down to a nice comfortable old age?" she asked allowing herself for once the luxury of being thoroughly unreasonable.

Chapter 4

The Episode of the Amorous Cricketer

It was Georgia's habit, when she had to make an important decision, to go for a long walk. Though a highly civilized woman, perhaps because she was one, she believed that in the last resort decisions should be made —where women are concerned, at least—by instinct. Intelligence could and should provide the material, set out fairly the pros and cons; but something deeper than intelligence must make the choice, ratify and execute the decision. Nigel was wont to say that this was a kind of moral cowardice—a specious excuse for letting the decision be taken out of one's hands. She partly admitted it, yet she had proved in experience that instinct on the whole knew what was best for her. Therefore she would walk and walk, till the warring arguments of her intelligence were too exhausted to squabble any longer, and when they had retired from the field the way would be made plain to her.

This morning, the day after Sir John Strangeways' visit, she put on an old tweed coat, went out hatless to the bus stop, took a bus to the Embankment, and walked eastward along Thames-side. A sea breeze gently fingered her dark hair. A tang of the sea rose up from the river. The river stretched away past mud flats and warehouses towards the sea, and beyond that lay many countries she knew and a few where she had never been. A few passers-by glanced curiously at the small, lithe figure, marching along with that solitary air as if she were alone in a desert and nothing in view but the horizon; they remembered, when she had passed them, that her face—for all its lack of conventional beauty—had been strangely arresting; the kind of eyes, the more imaginative might have remarked, which one would have expected to find gazing anonymous over a yashmak or far-sighted beneath an aviator's helmet.

The ebb-tide, piling up broken waves against the wind, seemed to be pulling at Georgia too, drawing her heart away to distant places as it always did. But the old fascination soon gave way to thoughts nearer home when she turned aside from the river and began threading her way through East End streets. Here, on all sides, were unforgivable poverty, indomitable vivacity. The green-skirted hills of Devon and these dingy, boisterous thoroughfares were each of them part of a country she loved—loved now with the heightened awareness both of a traveller who has seen many rival beauties and of one who, returning home, finds the beloved threatened by an insidious and mortal enemy.

This morning, superimposed upon the street scenes—the brightly-coloured coster barrows, the slatternly shops, the bustle and animation of the crowds, other images appeared, unnatural, shadowy intruders, as though the photograph of an ordinary room had been developed to reveal a ghost among the chairs and tables. She seemed to feel silent, jack-booted watchers standing outside frightened houses, figures kneeling to scrub the pavements, children coldly excluded from their familiar play-grounds, the informer's whisper in the café, fear and suspicion like rheumatism fastening upon the easy intercourse of friends—all the vicious little tricks of modern tyranny.

But what can I do? Why must Uncle John pick on me for this kind of work? I should be an abject failure. And to separate from Nigel. "It wouldn't be for long." All very well to say that. Nigel doesn't understand, he still half-thinks I'm self-sufficient—"the Cat that Walked by Herself." So I was, till I met him. I shouldn't see the daffodils spring up in the orchard where I planted them last year. My good girl, there are more important things than daffodils. Yes, I know, but— And Uncle John is so devastatingly thorough. He'll arrange this separation, in every agonizing little detail, so thoroughly that it might just as well be the real thing. But you know, my lass, you're secretly itching to have a go at this English Banner or whoever they are, one more adventure, your last adventure, and then an honourable retirement. Adventure? Pooh! It'll probably be nothing more lurid than following seedy aliens in and out of Lyons' tea-shops, prattling away in expensive, boring drawing-rooms.

So it went on. Georgia walked faster, till she was too tired even for these futile thoughts. When she returned home at lunch-time, and received the telephone message from Alison Grove, she did not realize how soon the decision was indeed to be taken out of her hands. "Yes, darling, I'll come," she said. "Do we dress? And Nigel? Oh, just a hen-party. Very well."

Alison Grove was at once Georgia's friend and her despair. An exquisite little blonde figurine of a woman, who contrived to run a car, a service flat, and always to be perfectly turned out, on no other visible means of subsistence than her salary as a society journalist, she lived a life which—for a woman of her many talents—seemed to Georgia quite incomprehensible. "But surely you don't really *enjoy* all these fatuous parties and receptions you go to?" Georgia would say. And Alison's turquoise-blue eyes would look more innocent than ever as she replied, "Well, you see, I'm an indoor girl, darling. And think of the pickings. I'm the Butterfly that Stamped." "Stamped on what?" "Oh, stamped on all the other butterflies, of course."

It was quite true. Alison was a consummately brilliant journalist who suited the *Daily Post* admirably, for that pushful young paper held its huge circulation by a process of alternately keeping its tongue in its cheek and sticking it out at all the celebrities of the day. Alison's gossip column, entitled "A Little Bird Whispers . . .", contained a masterly blend of snobbism and subdued derision. Society hostesses whose ears were sharp enough to catch this faint, derisive note had at first complained to Alison's editor, then attempted to exclude her. They very soon repented, finding that this gay little butterfly had the sharpest of stings. After her account of the coming-out ball of the Duchess of Speke's daughter—a ceremony from which the Duchess had given strictest orders that Alison should be excluded—society thought it best to accept Alison Grove on her own terms. For all that, Georgia still thought her friend was wasting her talents—an opinion she was to revise after the events of this evening.

At six o'clock Alison appeared, her coat opening on a superb white sheath of a gown that looked as if it had grown on her body like plumage.

"Oh, dear," sighed Georgia, "you always make me feel like something out of a rummage sale."

"An Eastern bazaar, more like," replied Alison, fingering the folds of Georgia's barbarically striped taffeta frock. "No, you win. You're Nature, I'm only Art. 'Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art.' Come along, or we'll be late."

"Where are we going?" Georgia asked, when they were settled into Alison's little coupé and speeding westwards towards the by-pass.

"Well, it's a sort of country club. *Très snob. Très cad.* On the Thames. I think you'll find the atmosphere interesting. Oh, and let's have no polite feminine wrangling about who's to pay the bill. It's on the house. I'm writing them up, and they've darned well got to bring out their most expensive victuals in return."

"What a blood-sucker you are, darling!"

"I pay my way. So will you. 'At the smart Thameford County Club, fashion's latest haunt, I noticed Georgia Strangeways. The famous explorer was, of course, exotic in striped taffeta.' "

"If you hadn't spent a fortune on your wave, I'd ruffle your hair for you."

"A tomboy, as ever." Alison's laughter, tiny and delicate as her figure, tinkled like Japanese windglasses. "I didn't anyway. I paid Janice for my wave in kind—a lovely paragraph about her beauty shop. It's nice work if you can get it."

"You really ought to be exposed."

"Oh, well, we all have our little secrets, don't we?"

Little secrets! thought Georgia. If Alison knew what I had on my mind, it'd snap her in two—the fragile wee thing. Well, perhaps not so fragile. But it's odd to think of us playing about like this just now—butterflies dancing over a volcano's crater. Tomorrow I suppose I must decide. Tonight we'll give ourselves up to such revelry as this ghastly club can provide. . . .

Revelry was not exactly the first word one would apply to the Thameford County Club, she decided when the car drew up to its imposing entrance half an hour later. The floodlights that bathed the Georgian façade in lustrous moonlight seemed less a glare of publicity than an act of homage to a national monument and its architect. Red-bricked, solid, yet of an exquisite purity and grace, the house slept in dignity, as though it had been called to its ancestors and found worthy.

"What a shame!" murmured Georgia, as they got out of the car.

"What's a shame?"

"To use this—this glorious shell for a lot of rich hoodlums in Bentleys."

"Sh! I have my living to make," Alison whispered. "Besides, you've not seen the inside yet. Who knows what a shell may hatch out?"

The door was opened by a powdered flunkey. It was perhaps at this point that Georgia felt the first qualm of uneasiness. Looking back on it, she thought it must have been the contrast between the spacious hall, the cool Regency decoration of white and green, the staircase that curved away up as gracefully as if it floated on air, and the wave of heat that came out at them. A damp, perfumed sort of heat, it was; they might have been walking into a conservatory.

The carpet gave like moss under their feet as they entered the lounge. Here, at small tables under a diffused glow of wall lighting, several people were drinking *apéritifs.* Lights and voices were alike discreet, as if subdued by the atmosphere of this beautifully proportioned room that breathed an older, more assured civilization.

"I shall begin to twitch all over soon," complained Georgia, sipping her sherry. "Steam-heating always gets on my nerves. Why should they make this place a cauldron? I——"

"Hush, my dear. A dark woman is coming into your life."

Georgia looked up. The door had opened and a woman entered—the proprietor of the club, Georgia suspected, though she inclined her head to the occupants of the room with a stateliness that suggested it was she, not they, who conferred a favour by being there. A rather overblown creature she was, but statuesque in her black lace gown. Georgia's attention was quickly diverted, however, by the man who followed her. He looked very old; he had the long, exhausted, parchment-skinned face of a Spanish grandee—the kind of face in which nothing seems alive but the eyes, which burn in an arrogant, heavy-lidded stare or film over suddenly like a saurian's. With a queer feeling of oppression, repulsion, she scarcely knew what, Georgia noticed that in this hothouse of a room he carried a plaid shawl over his shoulders.

Presently the strange procession came round to her own table. Georgia felt she ought to be bowing in a deep curtsy. She was aware of the old man's veiled eyes upon her. He might have been blind, and groping towards her by some sixth sense.

"I am very glad you could come, Miss Grove," the woman said. At once the spell was broken, for her voice—to Georgia's ear—had a synthetic quality, a note of falseness or vulgarity beneath its rich, drawling refinement. Alison, very much on her best behaviour now, introduced them.

"Madame Alvarez, our hostess. My friend, Mrs. Strangeways."

"Delighted to have you," murmured the woman. "Let me present my husband, Don Alvarez."

As though pulled forward on a string, the old man approached, took her hand, raised it to his lips. Georgia barely repressed a start of revulsion, for his hand was dry, brittle and cold as a lizard.

"You will find some quite interesting people here tonight, Miss Grove," the woman was saying. "Besides your own guest, of course," She inclined her head, and at once the old man's head bowed on his scrawny, tortoise neck with an equally grave inclination. "The Iberian ambassador is bringing a party. We expect Mr. Leeming—the banker, you know. And I believe Lady Mulcastle is coming. I hope you like our place, Mrs. Strangeways, what you have seen of it?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. It's quite charming." On an impulse, she added, "It's terribly hot, though, isn't it?"

Georgia's famous directness had shattered many façades in its time, but it made no impression on the two faces opposite her.

"My husband feels the cold so horribly. He's not used to our climate yet," the woman said. After a few minutes of stilted conversation, she moved away. The old man, who had not yet spoken a word, smiled suddenly at Georgia—a smile that gashed his face as though a parchment had been stretched too tight, and followed his wife.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Georgia when the pair were outside the room. "Who on earth is that preposterous old marionette?"

Alison giggled. "I told you you'd find the atmosphere interesting. He's the proprietor. Or should I say the husband of the proprietress? He lost his estates in Spain. That's the story, at any rate, and it's as good as any other. What do you think of the Madame?"

"Seville and Surbiton," replied Georgia tartly. "She looks rather discontented, doesn't she, in spite of the grand manner?"

"So'd you, if you were married to the oldest tortoise in the Zoo. However, we have our consolations. Perhaps Peter'll be here tonight."

"How you do jump about! Who's Peter?"

"Peter Braithwaite."

"Never heard of him."

Alison's turquoise eyes opened wide, "Oh, my dear! Do you never read the papers? Peter Braithwaite, England's mainstay in the coming struggle, the flashing young D'Artagnan of the tented field, the Mecca of schoolboy autograph-hunters, the——"

"Do shut up and tell me what you're talking about!"

"Peter Braithwaite. The cricketer. The English batsman."

"Oh, yes," said Georgia, feeling oddly deflated. Alison's talk had at first seemed to be leading in quite another direction—a quite impossible direction, she realized. "I do seem to have heard something about him. He's an amateur, I suppose."

"No. As a matter of fact he's a pro. But don't let that get you down. Peter is one of my leading sweetie-pies. You'll like him."

"A pro? What's he doing in this exclusive dump, then?"

"Oh, he's been taken up, you know," Alison replied vaguely.

Whether it was the effect of the steam-heating on her nerves or the result of her long walk this morning, Georgia found herself in an abnormally receptive state. At dinner the food was excellent and the head waiter, informed no doubt of Alison's business here, flatteringly attentive. There was something about this club, though, that Georgia could not get the hang of. Its atmosphere was oppressive in more ways than one. Most of their fellow guests—it was difficult to apply any other word to the clientèle of the regal Madame Alvarez—were of the usual restless, pleasure-seeking crowd; but there were a few that Georgia could not place at all. The bald-headed man, for instance, sitting by himself at a corner table, whose eyes she caught every now and then fixed upon herself with an expression of strange vivacity and intelligence. Surely she had seen that face before somewhere? Among all these smooth, vacuous faces it stood out like flesh and blood in a gallery of wax-works. There were others, too: people whom she would not have expected to find in so exclusive a company. She was about to comment on this, when Alison nodded towards the door and said, "Here's Peter."

The popular cricketer was not exactly as Georgia had imagined him. He had a stocky figure, a broad, leonine face that looked boyish, full of vitality, not in the least spoilt. When, passing their table, he grinned at Alison, Georgia felt his charm like an electric shock; she felt it was there, a natural magnetism, not assumed for any one's benefit. Peter Braithwaite, too, though several hands were raised to greet him, went over and sat at a table by himself.

"Isn't he nice?" asked Alison.

"He's certainly alive, which is more than one can say for most of the—I say, who's that over there?" Georgia indicated the bald-headed man, who was now scribbling abstractedly on the back of his menu card. Alison did not know him. Presently she inquired of the head waiter.

"That is Professor Steele, madam. Professor Hargreaves Steele."

Goodness! thought Georgia. No wonder I seemed to recognize the face. It appears in the press often enough. Hargreaves Steele was one of the foremost scientists of the day, an expert on tropical diseases who had also written a number of popular text-books. Because of the publicity he received, the scientific fraternity inclined to look on him as a bit of a charlatan. His achievements in his own field, however, made this attitude difficult to sustain. Glancing again at the famous scientist, Georgia observed him placing the point of his menu card on a thumb-nail and spinning it round like a tee-to-tum, his mouth pursed in a grimace of impish absorption. Still with the same expression, he proceeded to perform a trick that involved a saucer, a tumbler of water, a six-pence and a bent match. He seemed entirely oblivious of any audience, and indeed no one but Georgia was taking the least interest in him. Which was a pity, Georgia said to herself, for his hands were the most dexterous she had ever seen.

Aware of the scientist's eyes upon her again, she looked away. Her gaze turned to Peter Braithwaite. It was quite a different kind of shock he gave her this time. At first she thought he must be drunk, but she realized he had not been here long enough for that. His mouth was hanging open a little, his hands gripped the sides of the table, his eyes were glazed in a look of—what could it be but the most besotted infatuation? Georgia felt a little sick at the dire change wrought in that merry, ingenuous face; sicker still when she perceived that it was Madame Alvarez at whom the cricketer was gazing with such flagrant self-betrayal.

The woman moved regally from table to table, inquiring if her guests had all to their satisfaction. Her husband was no longer in attendance. Georgia noticed sly glances among the other diners when Madame Alvarez approached the cricketer's table and he invited her to take the vacant seat. There was something about his imploring gaze and this overblown creature's half-coy, half-possessive response that turned the whole evening rotten for Georgia. She was a woman herself, though, and therefore she could not resist the feminine impulse to know what it was about Madame Alvarez that attracted the young man. She must have been twenty years older than he. Her beauty, like her voice and queenly air, was surely synthetic. Georgia could imagine her mask falling off under the stress of fear or anger, and revealing a character common as dirt. Those discontented lines, dragging down the corners of her mouth, explained her simply enough. But what explanation could there be for Peter Braithwaite? And Alison didn't usually make mistakes of judgment.

"This is a bit much, isn't it, darling?" she whispered to her friend. "I don't approve of baby-snatching."

Alison's eyes were wide and innocent. "Oh, *that.* I told you we had our consolations. Poor Peter, he does have a time."

"But what can he see in her?"

"Mystery. Mysterious womanhood. Or perhaps he's just being kind-hearted."

Alison's hand, though, was clenched very tight over her gold evening bag, Georgia noticed. There were some things, then, that even Alison did not take lightly. Well, if Peter Braithwaite could prefer that ageing, counterfeit creature to pretty Alison, he deserved whatever was coming to him.

She was relieved when Alison suggested that they should take their coffee in the lounge. It amused her, too, to see the stir made by her friend's presence there. Social climbers who had not achieved the rather dubious distinction of being mentioned in her column competed more or less openly for Alison's attention. Those who had been born at the top of the tree treated her with a guarded courtesy. Alison herself flitted like a butterfly from group to group, gossiping away in her inimitable manner, listening with the adorable tilt of the head which made men feel—poor, deluded things—what an intelligent, sympathetic woman she was. Not till they had started on a rubber of bridge did Georgia realize that her friend's gaiety was not tonight quite natural. For her, Alison was playing abominably badly, and after a couple of rubbers, excused herself from further play.

Georgia, too, decided she had had enough. She also wanted to make the acquaintance of Professor Steele, who seemed by far the most interesting person here. But the professor was to be found in none of the rooms downstairs. Georgia wandered off upstairs by herself, admiring the beautiful proportions of staircase and landing, the delicate moulding on the walls. She felt restless again. The nerve-tingling heat, the vaguely uneasy atmosphere of the whole place. Through a door on the landing she heard voices. Assuming it was another public room, she was about to enter when she realized that the voices were those of Madame Alvarez and Peter Braithwaite.

". . . No, you silly boy, I won't. You're much too young. Besides, you couldn't afford to lose the money."

"I might win. I know I'd win. I'm always lucky at games. And at love. Otherwise I'd not have found you, would I?"

"Darling Peter! But I won't let you. I—I daren't."

"Well, you might let me have a look. I've never seen roulette——"

"Sh! You're not even supposed to know——"

So that's it, thought Georgia disgustedly, moving away. That's what the place is for. A discreet, posh, gambling den. I suppose that's where the professor has disappeared to.

Georgia felt a distinct sense of anti-climax. The climax of the evening, however, was yet to come. When, half an hour later, they were tucked into Alison's car and about to move off, Peter Braithwaite poked his head in at the driver's window.

"You forgot these," he said, handing Alison her gloves. Then, in a lower voice, "No luck yet."

Impulsively Georgia said, " 'No, you silly boy. You're much too young.' "

In the dim glow of the dashboard light, Peter Braithwaite's face showed surprise, but no trace of discomposure. His eyes twinkled at her. He threw up his chin and laughed merrily. "Good for you, Mrs.

Strangeways. Well, you've had a look at the bowling, haven't you? Good-night."

"What an extraordinary young man!" said Georgia when they had moved away. "And what on earth did he mean by having 'a look at the bowling'?"

Alison did not answer at once. She drove half a mile on, then stopped the car and in a voice that Georgia hardly recognized, said:

"Peter's a brilliant actor. He needs to be, just now."

"I don't understand. You mean that he—he's not in love with that Alvarez creature?"

"He's certainly not."

"But—but why?"

Alison was silent for a while. At last, laying her hand on Georgia's, she said, "You had a talk with Sir John Strangeways yesterday evening . . . No, it's all right, don't get in a flap. You see, Peter and I are working for him. We were working for him tonight."

Georgia stared at her speechless for a moment, utterly dazed, unable to believe her ears. If she had drawn the favourite in the Irish Sweep—if Nigel had told her that he was a secret drug addict—if the Last Trump itself had sounded—she could not have been more dumbfounded than by this incredible revelation. Alison! The gay, fragile, exquisite Alison! And Peter Braithwaite, the Test cricketer! . . . At last she found her voice, and came out slap with a round and most unladylike oath.

"Well, I'm—! You dissembling little cat! Just a gorgeous humming-bird to look at but——"

"Now, I can't be both, really!" Alison's little glass-tinkle of a laugh rang out. "I told you there were advantages attached to the job of a society journalist. Pickings. Oh, yes, one picks up quite a lot. That's why Sir John picked on me for the work."

"Do stop this Shakespearean-clown patter. You mean, that club——"

"Yes. We suspected the place was being used as a cover by some of the people behind the E.B. movement. They're clever. Their shield has three layers, so to speak. On the outside, the place is all posh respectability. But they disseminate tactful rumours among the habitués that the place is used for roulette. It's all very vague, of course. The bona-fide visitors dare not broadcast the rumour, for fear of taking the rap for libel. If one of them wants a flutter, the Alvarezes tell him, with a fine show of righteous indignation, that he's come to the wrong shop. At the same time, it gives the actual conspirators an opportunity for meeting in secret —in an atmosphere of accredited secrecy. That's their tactic, you see: to use a comparatively venial illegality as a cover for downright treason. Smart lads. The roulette is just a sop to Cerberus. Peter's got the Madame as far as admitting that roulette is played there. Madame Alvarez is the weak link in their chain, and we're playing on it good and hard."

"But how do you know that it's not simply roulette?"

"Oh, they're playing for higher stakes all right. You'll have to take my word for it. We have no proof, though, yet."

Georgia was silent for a while, digesting all this. At last she asked point-blank, "Why did you take me there tonight?"

Once again Alison did not answer directly. Her fingers tightening round Georgia's wrist, she said, "Peter loathes that woman. Just to touch her makes him feel sick. But he's willing to go through with it. Right through with it, if necessary. You understand?"

"Yes, I see. I suppose this was Sir John's idea, the wily old serpent. Well, I think I'd have come into it anyway."

"Good girl." Alison started up the car, and they shot away towards London.

Chapter 5

The Episode of the Two Dissemblers

When Georgia awoke next morning it seemed that she must have dreamt the whole bizarre episode of Thameford County Club. The weeks that followed were like a dream, too, but the kind of dream in which only a faint, intermittent sense of unreality disturbs the apparently logical sequence of images. At such moments, disquieting though they were, she could feel little urgency about her position, little apprehension for the future. Even the parting from Nigel, painful as it had been, was far different from her expectations. Sir John had seen to that.

"You've got to do the thing thoroughly," he had said. "If they have the least suspicion that there's anything faked about it, you won't stand a chance of getting your foot inside their movement. What's more," he added with the brisk air of a seedsman's assistant advising an amateur gardener, "you'd make things exceedingly dangerous for both yourself and Nigel."

Planning the detail of their "separation" kept them so busy that much of the sting was taken out of it. They worked out every move, every sordid business item, as though it were the real thing. At first the illusion of reality was so powerful that Georgia had to remind herself it was only make-believe. Soon, however, she surrendered to the illusion, for she realized that thus she would present a much more convincing front to the inquisitive.

"Good-bye, darling. Take care of yourself," Nigel said on their last morning together. They kissed passionately. She forced herself into a chair. There seemed no other way of resisting the temptation to stand by the window and watch the taxi taking him away. And that would never do; she must not allow even herself to suspect how bitterly this separation was hurting her; she had a part to play. Besides, one never knew that someone might not be watching.

From the cottage Nigel wrote appealing letters. Would she not change her mind, even now? Surely her decision to leave him was not irrevocable? Think how happy they had once been.

And she wrote back, no, it was over, their lives were too obviously incompatible. She had made a mistake in thinking she could settle down to the sort of domesticity he wanted. It had been all right for a while, but she was born restless, she wanted to go off on her travels again, she was determined to live her own life.

There were business letters too; about the cottage, the disposal of the furniture, the forwarding of her clothes and effects. He was to keep the cottage, she the London flat. Sometimes she felt wildly impatient at all this detail. It was like elaborately dressing a scene for a play that would never open. But she knew it was necessary. Their letters might, just conceivably, be intercepted. In any case, they kept all the letters they received, for the E.B.—as they had now come to think of it—would certainly make investigations before they let Georgia inside.

Then there were what Alison ghoulishly called "the official obituaries." Hints in the gossip columns, growing broader, becoming affirmations. Finally, an interview with one of the *Daily Post* feature-writers, to be reproduced next morning under the lurid headline, "Famous Woman Explorer Pans Domesticity."

After that—worst ordeal of all—the shock, sympathy, anger, curiosity, sly hints, well-meaning interference of Nigel's and her own acquaintances. "Your first appearance as a grass widow," Alison had remarked with some relish, "will be a tricky affair. What a pity you're so indecently fond of your late husband. You'll have to be coached."

And coached Georgia certainly was. During the fortnight that elapsed between Nigel's departure and the first hinting of their separation, Alison took her in hand. She would ring up and inquire innocently when Nigel was returning. She would take Georgia out to dinner or for an afternoon's shopping, and make off-hand, unexpected allusions to Nigel. Georgia soon learnt to answer these with a suitable blend of embarrassment and constraint. Knowing what terrible issues might hang on her being word-perfect, Georgia played up with the irritable concentration of an actress at a dress-rehearsal.

"Thoroughness and patience," Sir John Strangeways had said. "They're the things that really matter in our work." Well, they had been thorough enough. His own two visits to the flat a fortnight ago were to be explained, if any one should turn inquisitive about them, by the fact that, as Nigel's uncle and guardian, he had been trying to heal the rupture between them. Everything seemed to be provided for. She was not to communicate with Sir John until she had obtained vital information, and then through a code which she had memorized. Her own instructions were simple enough: to make contact with the E.B. conspirators and find out the owner of the locket.

It *sounded* simple enough at the time. But, as week followed week and the date of the General Election drew nearer, Georgia's patience was severely tested. Nigel, the whitewashed cottage on the green hillside, the hedge she had never finished cutting, all were like memories out of some former life. They had receded to an immeasurable distance. Often, discouraged out of belief, she was tempted to throw up this wild-goose chase and return home. Discouraging the work certainly was. At first there had been a certain interest—excitement even—in picking up old threads, in the round of parties, concerts, social events which she attended, in playing the part of a woman who has regained her freedom. But the excitement soon turned sour on her tongue. Though she let fall hints of Fascist sympathies, expressed fears of what the next government would do, they all seemed to fall on deaf or indifferent ears, and nowhere did she come across a face that recalled the features of the woman in the locket.

At last, when she was almost driven to despair by this nightmare sensation of walking eternally down a dead end, things began to open up. Peter Braithwaite and Alison Grove arrived at the flat one evening early in April. There was no mistaking when Peter was in good spirits. His eyes snapped with an audacious gaiety, the infection of his vitality made you want to turn somersaults, to run out and push over a bus, to tell him your most intimate secrets. He sat wrong ways about on an upright chair, his arms crossed on its back, and announced:

"Alison and I think we've pottered about long enough. I'll be playing cricket soon, so it's time I got a move on. We're going to take the offensive, start bumping them a bit."

"Bumping who?" asked Georgia, rather mystified.

"Peter's mixing his metaphors," said Alison. "The point is, he's at last found out the room at the Thameford Club where these goings-on take place, and he believes some funny stuff is due next Thursday. We're going to gate-crash."

"We? But surely——"

"You've got to be there, Georgia," Peter said earnestly. "To take note of the assembled faces, don't you see? There may be some there that aren't frequenters of the club."

"But—it'll give me away completely. The E.B.'d not let me within a mile of them after that. Not that I've got any nearer myself so far. But still——"

"You'll be all right. Just listen to me. This is the way we're going to do it . . ."

That Thursday evening was not the first occasion when the habitués of the Thameford County Club had seen young Braithwaite a little the worse for drink. Moreover, they were people for the most part who could maintain their well-bred air of indifference against anything short of mass-murder in their midst. It was bad enough letting a professional cricketer into the place at all—of course, Braithwaite wasn't quite an ordinary pro—but he might at least behave himself when he came here. There would be a dreadful scandal, too, if Señor Alvarez realized what was happening between his wife and the young cricketer. Still, in the interests of decorum and their digestions, the habitués were willing to ignore a great deal.

Tonight, however, Peter Braithwaite tried them very hard. Madame Alvarez had not put in an appearance yet, it was true; it might be better if she did, for Braithwaite was becoming positively obstreperous, and no one in his party seemed able to control him.

The party consisted of Alison Grove, Georgia and her cousin, Rudolph Cavendish—an eminently respectable young Conservative M.P., whom Georgia, partly from policy and partly in sheer impishness, had invited to make a fourth. Rudolph had been glad enough at the opportunity to meet the celebrated cricketer, but now he was beginning to regret it. For the celebrated cricketer was leaning across the table, fixing him with a slightly unfocussed eye, and remarking in resonant tones:

"Cavendish. You are Cavendish, aren't you? Yes, I thought so; I've a wonderful memory for faces. Well, Cavendish, I'm going to tell you something. 'S more about this club than meets the eye. Things go on which you'd scarcely believe. Oh, yes, they do. Don't dare to contradict me, Cavendish. The sticket here is wicky. Pardon. I should say, the wicket here is sticky. Distinctly sticky."

Rudolph glanced a little desperately at Georgia. "Why, that's news to me," he said.

"I dare say, Cavendish, if all were known, you'd find out a great number of things were news to you. Pray allow me to continue. I don't mind people having a little flutter—live and let live is what I say—but I resent, I bitterly resent this hole-and-corner business. If I want to gamble, my money's as good as any one else's—you agree?"

"Well, of course it is, old man."

"Don't interrupt, Cavendish. Now'z a well-known fact that roulette is played in this establishment——"

"Pipe down, Peter. Pull yourself together," said Alison sharply.

"Aha, you're jealous." Peter wagged a finger at her. "My good friend, Madame Alvarez, charming woman, above approach—reproach, she told me so."

"Told you what?" asked Rudolph inadvisedly.

"Come, come, come, come, *come,* Cavendish. Get a grip on yourself. You may be an M.P.—I've only Georgia's word for it—but you're a rotten bad listener. She told me they played roulette here. Perhaps you're suggesting my good friend, Madame Alvarez, is a liar?"

"No. Well, no. But——"

"Exactly, Cavendish. You've hit the nail on the head. He may not be an oil-painting, but he has it up here all right." Peter tapped his forehead, beaming fulsomely upon the embarrassed Rudolph. "As you were about to say, why is any Tom, Dick or Harry allowed to play roulette here, and me not allowed? It's pure snobbery. Well, I'll show 'em. I don't want to play roulette especially, but I'll not stand for snobbery. I shall sacrifice myself," Peter concluded with some grandeur, "in the interests of the democracy of sport."

Peter had waited till most of the diners were at the coffee and brandy stage before commencing his performance. There was less come and go of waiters now, and Peter timed his most audible sallies for moments when none were earshot. Georgia was apprehensive, though, lest he should overdo things and queer their pitch. He was far too good an actor to over-play the tipsy part; but Georgia recognized in him a latent recklessness which might lead him to over-play his hand in other ways. If she had been a cricket fan, she would have known that Peter Braithwaite's consummate skill as a batsman was slightly flawed by a tendency to "take a dip at it." The mercurial temperament which raised cricketing talent to the point of genius, also resulted in bad lapses. This apprehension of hers, together with a perfectly genuine embarrassment at the scene he was creating, gave her exactly the right air of fluster, humiliation and irritability when the moment came to make the next move.

"What's more," Peter said, "I'm going to do it now." He rose a little unsteadily to his feet. Rudolph Cavendish seized his coat and tried to pull him down to his seat, but Peter brushed his hand away.

"Leave me alone, or I'll knock you for six," he exclaimed dangerously. Everyone in the room was staring at them now.

Georgia made an apologetic gesture to the other two. "No. Leave him to me. I think I can manage him," she whispered, and taking Peter's arm, began to help him out of the room. "Come on," she said more loudly, "I'm going to see the fun too."

"Good lass."

Even when they were outside, in the deserted hall, Peter did not let up by a fraction. Leering at her with stupid cordiality, he said:

"Lot of pop-eyed stuffed-shirts in there. Don't like 'em. Just follow me now. I know the way."

They went upstairs. Peter tapped at a door that had "Manager" written on it. Madame Alvarez half-opened it and he thrust past her, Georgia hanging back on his arm.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, with a flurried gesture. "I can't—Mr. Braithwaite's a bit above himself. Peter, do for heaven's sake come away and stop being a nuisance. I'm sure Madame Alvarez is busy."

"Never too busy to see *me,* are you, ducky?" Peter leant against the panelled wall, his hands behind his back, grinning amiably at Madame Alvarez. "I want to play roulette."

Fear flashed in the woman's eyes. One corner of her mouth dragged down, shaking. She rushed at Peter, tried to drag him away from the wall, shook him feverishly. Peter would not budge. She sat down at her desk, hiding her quivering hands beneath it. "No, Peter. Please. You mustn't."

"I want to play roulette. I want to play roulette. I want to play roulette."

"They're not playing tonight. Peter, darling, I implore you to go away. Mrs. Strangeways, can't you——"

Georgia had noticed the woman's hands searching under the desk. After more altercation, Peter said:

"If you've pressed that little button of yours, I'm going to press this little button."

He turned a knob, part of the moulding behind him, and pushed sideways. The panel slid aside. Only it was not a panel; it was a sliding door, six inches thick, sound-proof. Georgia was at his side, trying to drag him away. He pulled her through into the small anteroom that was revealed. Nothing there but furniture. He quietly opened a door on the far side.

Georgia was never sure what she had expected to see. A long table, perhaps, covered with papers, people sitting round, weapons even. There was a long table certainly, and people sitting round, but no papers. With a sick qualm of disappointment she saw that it was in fact nothing more nor less than a roulette table. The players' faces were turned in their direction, puzzled, indignant or startled, as they entered. Their silence was accentuated by the click of the ivory ball as it spun, slower and slower, round the revolving disk.

Not till the ball had come to rest did any one speak. Then, his head poking up like a tortoise's from the plaid shawl that covered his shoulders, Señor Alvarez said:

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

In that quavering, scratchy, yet somehow dominant voice—it was the first time Georgia had heard him speak—the theatrical little phrase carried a certain menace. It was as if a dead man uttered an invocation in a dead language. Peter, however, whom she had sensed going limp with disappointment at her side now rose to the top of his form. He shook a waggish finger at Señor Alvarez, and remarked to the company in general:

"Ah, naughty, naughty! An illicit gambling hell? T'ch, t'ch! Well, I'll promise not to tell the police, if you'll let me play."

"Throw this fellow out," said Alvarez to the croupier standing at his elbow. "Perhaps some of you gentlemen will assist."

"Here, I say," Peter exclaimed in an aggrieved voice. "What's the idea? I've as much right to play as any one else. I've got plenty of money. It's just damned snobbery, that's all. Isn't it, Georgia?" A look of bleary cunning came into his eye. "Of course, if you're going to turn nasty—well, the police might be interested."

"This is a private party. They are friends of mine. Now, sir, are you going, or must we expel you by force?"

Watching the heads of the roulette players turn, like spectators at a tennis match, to and fro between Señor Alvarez and Peter Braithwaite, Georgia suddenly remembered something. She hoped her face gave away nothing of the revelation that had flared up behind it. To cover her excitement, she walked over to Señor Alvarez and said quietly:

"I very much regret this. Please forgive Mr. Braithwaite. He got a little drunk downstairs, I'm afraid. He's very young. I tried to restrain him, but he insisted on coming in here."

"Pray do not apologize, madam. It is I who should do so, for my seeming inhospitality. But you realize that my guests—" His old voice, slurring and rustling like silk, faded out into a courteous gesture.

"Come along, Peter," she said. "I'm sure Señor Alvarez will let you play some other night."

"I want to play tonight. With that lovely little ball. Whizz, whirr, clickety-click." Peter was thinking, she knew, that he must at all costs keep the foothold he had obtained here. He was thinking that he must watch them playing roulette, to make certain the game was not a blind. It was his last hope. How could she convey to him that there was no longer any need for it?

Señor Alvarez motioned away the croupier and the grey-moustached, military-looking gentleman who were now standing at Peter's elbow.

"One moment," he said, "Mr. Braithwaite, may I ask how you discovered our harmless little secret?"

"An open secret, old boy. Everyone knows roulette is played here."

"I do not make myself quite clear." Señor Alvarez' voice was still silkily courteous, but there was an undertone of harshness behind it, like the sound of a roughened finger rubbing against silk. "I must ask you how you found your way in here."

Georgia saw the trap instantly. It was only through Madame Alvarez that Peter could have learnt the secret of the sliding panel, but if he admitted this too readily the genuineness of his infatuation for the woman would at once become suspect. She dared not look at Peter. His intoxication was so convincing, it was impossible to feel that he had all his wits about him. She heard him, after a pause, say:

"Oh, dash it, I can't tell you that. I mean, it was just by accident. I happened to be fiddling with that panel the other day, and the jolly old thing came away in me 'and."

Georgia's heart leapt with relief. Peter had taken the right line. There was exactly the right blend of hesitation, embarrassment and unconvincing candour in his voice.

"My wife didn't by any chance——"

"What the devil d'you mean, sir?" interrupted Peter, blustering. "I tell you, I found the knob by accident. I happened to be in her room out there one day, waiting for her to come in, and—are you suggesting I'm a liar?"

"Please, Mr. Braithwaite." Alvarez' hand sketched a deprecating gesture. The stretched, parchment face broke into a smile that Georgia found peculiarly chilling. "Believe me, we appreciate your—er—chivalry. It is, if I may say so, worthy of a better cause."

Peter's fists clenched. "I came here to play roulette, not to be insulted with oily compliments. Georgia, we'd better go."

"Oh, no, I insist on your staying. Perhaps you will take my invitation to play as an apology for any unintentional discourtesy of mine. I'm sure my guests will be charmed to——"

There was a general stir of assent. Preserving his air of slightly tipsy dignity, Peter allowed himself to be persuaded. Room was made for them both at the table. Georgia found herself sitting next to Professor Hargreaves Steele. He, and the financier, Mr. Leeming, were the only two present whom she had seen at the club on her few previous visits. Georgia had more leisure to observe them now. The white-moustached man was introduced as General Ramson. There was a middle-aged man, with the melancholy features and heavily pouched eyes of the Russian nobility —Prince Orlov. There was a Herr Schwartz, pink and white of complexion, in a tight, high collar that might have grown into his fleshy neck. Beside the men, three ladies were playing. Two of them Georgia put down as "bazaar-openers," and left it at that for the time being. The third, a Miss Mayfield, was a younger, more striking woman. Her mop of flaxen hair and the complete absence of cosmetics on her face made her an incongruous figure in this company. A healthy, bouncing, keep-fit sort of girl, Georgia thought her—but the gambler's fever appeared in those forget-me-not blue eyes when the wheel began to spin again.

Indeed, as far as the evidence of her senses could go, Georgia was bound to admit that the whole company looked exactly like what they were pretending to be—rich, bored, more or less respectable people with a weakness for Dame Fortune. Their absorption in the game, their little stereotyped mannerisms in placing the chips or jotting down a calculation, the haggard tension that never quite broke through their polite poker-faces—all indicated the seasoned gambler. Georgia was discouraged by this, until she remembered that, if her instinct and Peter's information were correct, these people were indeed gamblers—and for higher stakes than they laid on the table tonight. Much more discouraging was the fact that among these nine faces there was not one which suggested the winsome, unforgettable features of the woman in the locket. Well, why should there be? she asked herself despondently. If that locket did belong to one of the leaders of the conspiracy, he'd not be likely to put inside it the picture of any one who could be connected with him.

She found herself eyeing the jewelled watch on Miss Mayfield's wrist. Was there one of the E.B. disks hidden there too? The next moment a voice at her side was murmuring to her unbelievably:

"And what does John Strangeways think about all this?"

It was as startling as the sudden shrill of a telephone bell in a dark house in the small hours of the morning. Georgia perhaps was never again so near to giving herself away. It seemed minutes, though it was only a second, before she realized what Professor Steele had meant, and replied:

"I don't really know. Officially he'd disapprove, no doubt."

"I hope you're not a police spy in our midst," said the scientist, giving her one of his abrupt, playful smiles. Georgia smiled back.

"Oh, I won't tell on you. As a matter of fact, I shan't be seeing much of Sir John now."

"Are you really separated from your husband? It's not just a publicity stunt?" The professor's puckish grin made even this remark sound almost inoffensive, but Georgia replied in kind:

"I don't think Professor Hargreaves Steele is quite the right person to make charges of publicity-seeking."

"Madam, as one victim of the Press to another, I offer you my humblest apologies."

What an enigmatic creature he is, to be sure! she thought. Is he—could he possibly be one of Sir John's helpers too? Or was it just by accident that his questions came so near the mark?

Nothing else of moment happened that evening. Georgia took advantage of Peter's having had a short run of luck to persuade him out of further play. He left with her, giving an admirable imitation of a fundamentally decent young chap who has made a nuisance of himself, has sobered up, and is feeling a bit ashamed. He was very silent in the car, and when the three of them had got rid of Rudolph and were having a nightcap in Alison's flat, he said dismally:

"Well, there it is. Looks as if we'd been leading ourselves by the nose properly."

"Why so gloomy?" asked Alison.

"The boys were just playing roulette. A plumb wicket. To think I've gone through all that with the Madame for nothing. Do stop looking like a monkey that's found the king of fleas. Georgia."

"Not for nothing," said Georgia slowly. "Did you notice the way all their heads were turned to the door when we went in? It never occurred to me at first."

"Well, they'd been warned. The Madame rang that bell under her desk, which presumably meant that some rough fellows were going to burst in on their roulette."

"But, don't you see? Several minutes elapsed between her ringing the bell and our entering. If it'd been a genuine roulette game the only point in the bell would have been to warn them to conceal the evidence of the game. But they didn't conceal anything. They wanted us to believe they'd been rouletting all the time. But they made that mistake of looking up when we came in. Real gamblers, like they certainly are, would have been far too absorbed in the game to pay any attention to a door opening—the ball was still rolling, remember. Either the bell Madame Alvarez rang connects with the gambling-room, in which case, if the roulette was bona-fide, they should have concealed the evidence of it; or the bell does not connect with that room, in which case, if they were genuine roulette gamblers, they'd never have all looked up at our entrance. Therefore, which ever way you take it, the game was bogus."

Peter slapped his knee in an access of enthusiasm. "By Jove, you've got it!" he exclaimed, and took her hands, and danced her round the room.

Chapter 6

The Episode of the Playful Scientist

The next day hung heavily on Georgia's hands. She was filled with a sense of anti-climax and doubt. Peter would be passing on to Sir John the information about those who had been present in the gambling-room last night. Their antecedents would be investigated, their movements watched perhaps. But surely the whole thing must be a mare's-nest? She perceived how flimsy were the arguments she had built upon that interrupted game of roulette. It was incredible to suppose that men like Mr. Leeming and Professor Steele, men of international reputation, should be involved in a melodramatic, hole-and-corner, entirely hypothetical conspiracy. Well, perhaps not hypothetical. Sir John was not given to alarmism. Peter and Alison must have had some evidence that the Thameford County Club was not exactly what it seemed, and her own instinct certainly told against Señor Alvarez. Alison, too, had informed them last night that Herr Schwartz was foreign correspondent of a Nazi newspaper, and it was well known that these Nazi journalists in England had more irons than one in the fire. Yet Georgia herself was no further advanced on her own mission. Indeed, if those respectable-seeming gamblers had been members of the E.B., it would be more difficult than ever for her to get a footing in the movement. It was difficult now to imagine that Peter's act could have hoodwinked them entirely.

Walking in Hyde Park, the mild April day blossoming all round her with tulips and tender, budding branches and the cries of children who somersaulted on railings or streaked erratically over the grass, Georgia felt the very despair of loneliness. Her knowledge seemed to cut her off from all this innocence and gaiety. She was like a prophet who sees doom imminent but is bound to silence, the weight of his knowledge suffocating his heart. Georgia's reverie was interrupted by a barking and gambolling at her heels—a Kerry Blue which had become fascinated by a stick she had absent-mindedly picked up from the grass and was dangling from her hand. She was about to throw the stick when the dog's owner, walking with a long, country stride, caught her up. It was Miss Mayfield—

and looking very much more at home here, in her low-heeled shoes, tweed skirt and periwinkle-blue jersey, than she had looked at the Thameford Club.

"How clever of Gyp to find you," she said.

"Oh, were you looking for me?"

"No, not particularly. It's quite a coincidence, though, isn't it?" The girl blushed ingenuously, a little angry with herself, perhaps, for having nothing better than platitudes to offer a celebrity like Georgia Strangeways.

"You don't live in London, do you?" Georgia asked.

"How did you know? Well, I don't, as a matter of fact. Not much, I mean. My father has a place in Berkshire. He's a trainer." She rushed it all out, not quite apologetically, not quite defiantly. Georgia said it must be fun—horses to ride, the downs wide open before you.

"Oh, it's all right, I suppose. I get bored, though. I'm sick of men who do nothing but chew straws. I suppose you're wondering what I was doing in that lousy joint last night?"

"Playing roulette, I imagine," said Georgia drily.

"It's all very well for you," Miss Mayfield exclaimed, pulling Georgia down on to a seat. "I mean, you can go exploring, you've done things, you're free as the air. You must understand what it is to crave for adventure— for any sort of excitement. And the world's such a drab, dreary place just now, isn't it?" She stretched her arms, looking in her ardour quite magnificent, a Nordic goddess. "I want to do things too. But Daddy—well, you know what fathers are like. He's a darling, but ghastly old-fashioned. He'd really like me to ride side-saddle, and sit at home in the evenings with a good book."

"He wouldn't approve of roulette, I take it."

"Oh, glory, no! He'd go up in smoke. That's really what I meant to— Look here, you're not going to tell any one about that, are you? If it got round to him, there'd be hell to pay."

"My dear, why should I tell any one? I was playing myself. It does seem to me, though," Georgia picked her words with delicately veiled contempt, "a pretty—well—decadent form of excitement. I should have thought you could do better than that. D'you play much?"

As she had hoped, her words stung. The girl tossed her flaxen hair in an abrupt, ungracious gesture. "It's excitement," she said sullenly.

"Excitement? With a lot of rich dagoes in that hot-house? Watching a fatuous little ball twiddling round? Heaven help us!"

"Maybe there's more adventure in it than you think." The girl bit her lip and added quickly, "I mean, when you haven't much money, you get a real thrill out of winning—or losing. Anyway, they're not dagoes, not all of them."

Georgia raised her eyebrows, and the conversation lapsed for a while. Maybe there's more adventure in it than you think. Was Miss Mayfield being a thought too ingenuous? Or was she indeed the fanatic that she looked? Georgia could understand how the E.B. conspiracy would appeal to a girl like this. It would seem not so much a conspiracy as a crusade. Fanatics were necessary—and dangerous—to any revolutionary movement. Here might be another weak link.

Skilfully Georgia turned the conversation towards Nazi Germany, speaking with feigned admiration of the things she had seen there. She was rewarded by a gleam in the girl's eyes, a quickened breathing.

"Yes," she said, "it's wonderful. I've never been there, but I can imagine it all—the spirit of youth and confidence and hero-worship. Sometimes I wish we could have something like that in England—not Fascism, of course, but something adapted to our national character. Get rid of all these doddering old politicians and the greasy Jews and the agitators."

"I quite agree. We've given democracy a fair trial, and it's let us all down. It's a great ideal, I dare say, but in the modern world we have to be realists. Let the best people rule—even Plato said that—and the rest will be far happier for it in the long run."

Georgia had got so used to throwing out this kind of bait in vain that it almost unbalanced her when Miss Mayfield took it.

"I say, you not a member of the English Banner, are you?"

"English Banner? No. What's that?"

Miss Mayfield told her. She talked, of course, about the harmless organization which Sir John had already described to Georgia; talked with such naive enthusiasm that Georgia found it difficult to believe she knew the sinister uses to which this organization was being put. However, when Miss Mayfield invited her to stay with them in Berkshire and attend a meeting of the Banner, Georgia readily accepted. There was more in this shy, abrupt, ardent girl than met the eye . . .

The conversation under the April trees faded from Georgia's mind next day, for events took a sudden, dramatic turn. While she was sitting at breakfast the telephone bell rang. It was Peter Braithwaite, asking her to come over to his lodgings at once. Georgia gulped down her coffee and took a taxi to St. John's Wood. Peter was waiting for her in the hall of the apartment house: his tanned, good-humoured face showed anxiety.

"Madame Alvarez has turned up. I'm in a proper jam," he whispered.

"I've quietened her down a bit—she was almost hysterical; but I'm supposed to be at Lords, coaching some boys, at ten o'clock. Can you carry on for a bit? I couldn't get hold of Alison."

They went upstairs to Peter's rooms. He had certainly not exaggerated. The woman was in a state of collapse. Her regal bearing was gone. Without make-up, her face looked muddy-grey and sagging; she had the frowsiness of a woman who has been travelling all night in a crowded railway carriage. Her eyes were sunken and glittering in what seemed a fever of fear.

"I'm so sorry, Madame Alvarez. Are you feeling ill? Would you like us to get a doctor?"

"I'm not going back there," she muttered. "I'm not going back. Don't let them take me back."

"Why, of course not," said Georgia soothingly. "You're quite safe here."

"You don't know them," the dead, sleep-walking voice went on. "He locked me in my room yesterday. . . . I daren't go to sleep. I had to in the end . . . When I woke up I felt ill. I tied the sheets together and climbed out of the window. You don't understand . . . He frightens me."

The woman's head rolled from side to side and her eyes winced, as though the daylight hurt them. She was a pitiable sight, slumped in the chair like a broken-limbed doll; but pity was an emotion that Georgia could not squander now. She made Madame Alvarez finish the brandy which Peter had poured out. She knelt beside the woman, chafing her hands.

"Come now, my dear. Just tell us everything. We can't help you unless we know——"

"Rosa says her husband was very angry because she let us in to the roulette game." Peter glanced significantly at Georgia. "It wasn't her fault, of course. I've told her I'll go and explain to Señor Alvarez."

"I won't go back. I won't go back," the woman repeated dully. Georgia gripped her hands urgently. Something of Georgia's vitality communicated itself to Rosa Alvarez. She straightened her back with an effort, crying, "I mustn't stay here! He'll guess I've come here. Is that his car outside?"

"There's no car outside," said Georgia. "Take it easy, my dear. Your husband can't hurt you. Surely he'd never hurt you just because you were a little indiscreet over the roulette? Are you sure he's not jealous about—well, about you and Peter?"

"No. Not that. He always lets me go my own way. He's an old man."

"Well, it must be something else then." Georgia gazed fixedly into the woman's distraught eyes. It was as bad as the Inquisition, but it had to be done. "Wasn't it something more than the roulette? Something else that happens in that room? Wasn't it, dear? Why should he make such a fuss about a game?"

"Something else? I don't understand. . . . He told me no one must go into that room while they were playing. I told you not to, Peter. Why did you? I tried to stop Peter going in, didn't I?"

Madame Alvarez was shivering at intervals, like a fly-teased horse. Standing by the window, Peter had his hands clenched in his coat pockets. He knew Georgia must be ruthless, but he could not endure attending the operation as a spectator.

"I've got to be off now," he said. "Back at lunch. Georgia will look after you till then. You'll be all right, Rosa."

Georgia expected a scene, but the woman seemed sunk in apathy. With a gesture that Georgia was never to forget, Peter Braithwaite walked over to Madame Alvarez and tenderly kissed her forehead. A lover could not have done less. A Judas could not have done more. And Peter was neither, though he had to appear both.

After his departure, Georgia renewed her efforts to make Rosa Alvarez betray her associates. She used, with nervous shrinking and cruel tact, every feminine weapon of insinuation, sweet guile, sympathy, delicate bluff. At the end she had got no further. She was compelled to believe that Madame Alvarez knew nothing of what had really gone on behind the scene at the Thameford County Club. Either that, or she was too ill or frightened to speak.

Georgia decided to launch a last attack. "Why did you say you were afraid to go to sleep?"

But, before Madame Alvarez could answer, there was a sound of altercation below, feet walking up the staircase. The landlady put her flustered head inside. "I'm sorry, m'm. I told them as Mr. Braithwaite was out." And she was pushed aside by two men who entered—Señor Alvarez, and the croupier of the roulette table, in chauffeur's uniform today.

Rosa Alvarez shrank back from them with a small, animal cry. The old man paid no attention to Georgia, but leaned solicitously over his wife, stroking her hair. She shut her eyes tight, as though the caress was a prelude to torture.

"My love, you gave me such a fright," he said in his old, paper-thin voice. "We didn't know where you'd gone. Luckily, I found Mr.

Braithwaite's address in your book. Now you must come home and go to bed. You're not well. We'll send for the doctor."

Georgia had once seen a cat playing with a shrewmouse. The mouse ran into an angle of the wall. The cat fetched it out with one flick of its paw. Again and again the mouse had run for refuge to the same spot, flattening itself into the angle of the wall, screeching like a slate-pencil, and again and again the cat had flicked it out. Madame Alvarez huddled back in her chair. It seemed as if she, too, was trying to make herself small, to sham dead. To her husband's patient entreaties she returned no sound—except, when he touched her, that jarring, desperate little cry. Georgia could stand it no longer.

"Just a minute, Señor Alvarez. Your wife came here in a hysterical condition, which I'm afraid your presence is exacerbating. She said she had been locked in her room all yesterday. She said you were very angry with her over that roulette business. I don't want to interfere, but she's evidently ill and I think we ought to get a doctor at once. If you leave her here, I assure you she'll be in good hands."

"I am sure of it, madam. But I could not think of putting you and Mr. Braithwaite to such trouble. If I may just have a word with you in private." The old man led her outside the door. His long, distinguished face broke into a melancholy smile. "You will understand, when I tell you that my wife suffers from recurrent delusions, a form of persecution-mania. Unfortunately—I shall never forgive myself for it—I did speak too severely to her about that little indiscretion, and it brought on one of her attacks. At such times she has to be—confined. And expert medical attention is neded. If it would set your mind at rest to accompany her home with us and speak to her doctor, pray do so. I realize how distressing this must be for you."

Georgia had had many difficult decisions to make in her life, but never a harder one than this. She distrusted Señor Alvarez' exquisite courtesy. Her instinct was to keep Rosa out of his hands. Yet, if she resisted him now, she would inevitably incur suspicion herself. On the one hand, a problematic danger to this woman (and she could not be sure that Señor Alvarez' explanation was not the true one). On the other hand, her own chances of getting at the heart of the conspiracy ruined. In an instant Georgia had weighed them up, and was saying:

"Why, of course, Señor Alvarez. She must go home with you. I'll come too, if I may. It's not a question of setting *my* mind at rest, but I think it might be a little comfort to her."

The drive back to Thameford was something she would have given much to be able to forget, even when she found out later that Rosa Alvarez was already beyond all help before she arrived at Peter's rooms that morning. She saw the woman, now comatose, to bed: had a word with Dr. Wilson, her medical attendant: returned to London and, from a public call-box, rang up Sir John Strangeways. Dr. Wilson's credentials would be investigated. Sir John's trusted men would keep an eye on the Thameford County Club, that was all she could do. . . .

A week or two afterwards, Peter Braithwaite came round to see her. He told her that Madame Alvarez was dead. "It's a dirty game, this," he said, walking restlessly about the room. "I don't like it. I was afraid they'd do it, but I couldn't raise a finger to help her."

"Do you mean they killed her? But surely——"

"Of course they did. Oh, Dr. Wilson gave a certificate all right, no doubt. They do things in style. No expense spared. He'll be one of them."

"What did she die of?"

"Some obscure disease. Alison inquired of the inconsolable widower. Poor Rosa—well, she did set my teeth on edge, but I'd like to lay my hands on that old fiend, Alvarez."

"But if it was a disease—surely you're not suggesting——?"

"Oh, it was all above board. Very neat. They even called in a specialist. They frighten me a bit at times, these chaps we're up against—the way they have everything at their finger-tips. No old-fashioned business of blunt instruments. Just a neat little dose of microbes."

"Peter, you're letting your imagination run away with you."

"No imagination about it. They're merely taking a leaf out of the Hooded-Men book. When the Cagoulard Conspiracy was exposed, the French police discovered a laboratory swarming with cultures of disease-bacteria. One of the Cagoulards confessed that these were prepared to be used against traitors within the movement. Laugh that off if you can. No wonder poor Rosa was afraid to go to sleep that night. She was afraid of having a shot of filthy microbes injected into her bloodstream. Her 'delusions of persecution' would explain away any charges she might make. I tell you, you've got to watch your step in the E.B."

Georgia reflected, well, if that is really true, Madame Alvarez must have been inside the movement after all. They'd surely not kill her just for having given away the secret of the roulette, and in that case they may suspect her of telling Peter or me something about the movement. It looks as if we should have to watch out step, too. As the weeks passed, however, Peter's suggestion seemed to her more and more fantastic. It was not till two months later, when Georgia had at last succeeded in finding her way into the councils of the E.B., that she realized how near the mark Peter had been. That scene, so innocent on the surface, so abominable beneath, bit itself deep into her memory.

A hot June evening. A dinner-party in Professor Hargreaves Steele's house at Hampstead. Their host's bald dome, whose tufts of hair on either side gave him a faint resemblance to Mr. Pickwick, shone in the candlelight as he turned from one guest to another, now bubbling over with impish merriment like a Pooka, now dismissing some argument with incisive, almost contemptuous logic, now relapsing into a moment of abstraction when nothing of him seemed alive but his restless, agile hands that performed little tricks of prestidigitation while his mind withdrew into some abtruse speculation of its own.

Georgia watched him, fascinated. In conversation, his intellect so dominated the company that one could feel it almost physically, as though it were one of those irresistible elemental forces, so dear to the old writers of ghost stories, which could smash their way through padlocked doors and shoulder strong men aside like wisps of straw. Even his playfulness had something of the lion's paw about it. Yet this weight of intellect was accompanied by no corresponding impression of character. There was no facet of character you could get a grip on and say "this is the real man," only a series of moods. Like an elemental, Professor Steele was somehow amorphous—he changed shape so fluently that you could not pin him down to any one shape at all.

Each man's morality, thought Georgia, is a compromise between the strength of his character and the strength of his environment. Where you have no character to fix the ratio, you get the genius and the lunatic, to whom morality is meaningless. A genius is only a specialized lunatic with special opportunities. For this reason, Hargreaves Steele must be one of the most dangerous men in England: an elemental body that has immense momentum but no responsibility.

It amused Georgia to watch some of the women lionising the professor. He allowed them, metaphorically, to stroke his mane, admire his teeth, even tease him a little, but, if they got too venturesome, he would knock them off their balance with one lazy, unerring sweep of his paw. Later, no doubt, they would show off the scars to their acquaintance. There were innumerable stories current of the scientist's scarifying retorts—most of them told against themselves by the victims. One got a certain vicarious fame out of having been taken down a peg by Hargreaves Steele.

After dinner, he invited a few of them to inspect his laboratory. Here, among the tanks and the microscopes, he became a different person. Georgia understood why his colleagues sometimes referred to him as a "charlatan" or a "bit of a mountebank." He liked putting on a show. It was as though, entering the laboratory, he assumed the weird cloak of an ancient alchemist. His manner grew suddenly brusque, business-like, yet he manipulated his apparatus with a certain stylized flamboyance and an inward abstraction of eye that set his audience at a distance; they might have been watching him through the thick glass of one of his own tanks. The impression of a conjuror at work was increased by the scientist's assistant, a chubby, bristly moustached little man who in absolute silence set out the materials for each new demonstration, moving anonymously about the laboratory as if he were an automaton controlled by wireless from the professor's massive forehead.

One woman, a little bored with the performance, skittishly asked, "When are you going to show us where you keep all the wretched guinea-pigs you torture, Professor Steele?"

"Madame, in the eyes of science, you and the guinea-pig are equally suitable material for investigation. The difference is that you are more expensive to keep."

The woman, whose extravagant tastes had compelled her husband publicly to repudiate her debts, gave a brittle laugh. Professor Steele's mouth quirked in a complacent smile, like an amateur comedian whose gag has brought the house down. A few minutes later, when the professor was demonstrating an electric motor, one of the male guests asked, rather self-importantly:

"Why don't you use the Zinkessen model? I should have thought——"

"Because this one is better," replied the professor abstractedly, without even looking up.

When he had finished what Georgia called in her own mind his "set pieces," he unexpectedly took her by the arm and, ignoring the other guests who trailed round after them or moved back to the drawing-room, led her on a little tour of inspection.

"You've seen some of the effects on your travels, I daresay, Mrs. Strangeways. Come and have a closer look at the causes."

Pursing his mouth, he adjusted a powerful microscope. "That's *Cholera vibrios.* Active little chaps, aren't they? Take a peep."

Georgia saw what looked like a number of dark worms writhing and thrashing about, changing pattern like a demented wallpaper.

"Here are some tuberculosis bacilli. Rather dull. Most of us carry them . . . Bubonic bacillus . . . *Borrelia berbera*—he's the parasite that causes African relapsing fever . . . Next, three different species of malarial parasite—*Plasmodium vivax, Plasmodium malarioe, Plasmodium falciparum* . . . Anthrax—ordinary-looking little beast, isn't he? . . . And here's the sleeping-sickness trypanosome . . . And if you come over to this microscope, I think we've got—yes, we have—the head of a tsetse fly, the one that transmits sleeping-sickness in Africa."

When he had finished, Georgia felt a little sick. "I suppose you're used to having all these filthy cultures about the place, I'd be getting up all hours of the night to see that none of them had escaped."

Professor Steele's eyes twinkled. "Twinkled" was perhaps an inadequate word for the scintillating, almost a little crazy look that came into them. He patted her shoulder.

"Don't you worry," he said. "I'll not let them out after you—not if you're a good girl."

The two other guests who still remained with them laughed merrily. Old Steele was in good form tonight. But Georgia's blood ran cold. She knew that the scientist's words had been a threat. She had seen too much of the horrors these vile, microscopic creatures caused, too much of the E.B. and Professor Steele, to be able to take the threat lightly. Rosa Alvarez, perhaps, had been struck down from this bland, hygienic laboratory. She herself, a member of the movement now, had received her warning, delivered in innocent terms before two unconscious witnesses, like a bomb concealed in a Christmas cracker.

It was this scene, as much as anything else, that enabled her months later, when the leader of the conspiracy, the man whom the E.B. intended to make dictator, was in her power, to treat him with as little compunction as she would have treated one of Professor Steele's disease-carrying lice.

Chapter 7

The Episode of the English Banner

That scene in Professor Steele's laboratory marked a new stage in Georgia's relations with the E.B., a stage which had opened during her first visit to Alice Mayfield's home towards the middle of May. Reviewing the whole affair a year later, she saw this visit in its true perspective. It reminded her of an occasion when, as a girl, she had been sailing on a friend's yacht to the Outer Hebrides. Barra, a sullen, black wedge, had risen over the horizon. The yacht had approached the island, nearer and nearer, till it seemed she must ram herself against those inhospitable cliffs: and then, almost in a moment, the opening of the sound appeared, at first as a narrow, angled rift in the cliffs, then a navigable channel, and they had slid through into the heart of the island, into Castle Bay where Kishmul's Castle, toy-like on its tiny rock, lay marooned in the farthest reach of the bay.

So it was with Georgia now. Driving hard at the outer walls of the conspiracy, until it seemed she must break herself vainly against them, she had found an opening with sudden, magical ease. . . .

On the way down to Berkshire that Friday afternoon, she summed up the information she had received from Alison and others about the Mayfield stables. George Mayfield, a cavalry officer and celebrated amateur rider in his day, now trained for Lord Chilton Canteloe. Chilton—"Chillie," as he was affectionately known by the millions who had profited either directly by his philanthropies or indirectly from the way his horses justified their backers' confidence—was a millionaire, still in his early middle age, but already something of a legend in the country, a figure as colourful in his way as the great Whig noblemen of the 18th century. Georgia, indeed, had suggested to her friend, half in fun, that he would be the ideal man for the E.B. to have chosen as dictator, but Alison had replied, "Oh, no. Don't go barking up that gum tree, my sweet. Chillie's all right. He's a grand chap. You wait till you meet him."

Georgia, however, was not to meet him on this visit. He was abroad, Alice Mayfield told her when she met her at the station. And a certain rapt, yet defensive look that came into the girl's eyes at the mention of his name suggested that here was another of Chilton Canteloe's easy conquests. Perhaps not so easy, thought Georgia. Alice is a proud prickly creature; she'd be a handful all right.

Five minutes' drive brought them to the Mayfield stables. The long, rambling red-brick house, the white picket-fences, the stables behind—all looked fresh as paint against the great ridge of downland already massed with shadows from the evening sun. The air was full of sound: the muffled stamp and clatter of horses, the clink of buckets, voices buzzing from yard and paddock, and above them a remote roaring as a flight of pursuit-planes—arrowed out like wild geese—passed overhead, homing towards their aerodrome beyond that shoulder of the downs. "We've got three aerodromes now, within a radius of twenty miles or so," Alice said. "Atterbourne, Hartgrove and Twybury."

"Don't the planes upset your horses?"

"Oh, they've got used to them."

"We've all got used to them, I suppose. Used to the idea of the air being the element of death."

"You're not a pacifist, are you?" Alice Mayfield asked sharply.

"Dear me, no. I dislike being killed without having a chance to hit back, though."

"I wanted to join the Civil Air Guard, but Daddy wouldn't let me. He thinks flying is not womanly."

"You should tell him to read Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee,* then. Particularly the nuptial flight chapter."

"Daddy read a book? I should laugh. The book of form's the only one he ever opens."

"What's that, my dear?" said a voice behind them. "Hello, who've we got here?"

"Mrs. Strangeways. Let me introduce you. My father. Mrs. Strangeways is one of our guests for the week-end, Daddy, in case you've forgotten."

"Delighted," growled Mr. Mayfield vigorously pumping Georgia's arm up and down. "My little girl's talked a lot about you. Taken a fancy to you, yer know. I'm a bit deaf, so yer'll have to shout at me. Anno Domini, yer know. Why didn't yer bring yer husband?"

"Daddy! You know I told you——"

"She oughtn't to do it, at her age."

Georgia glanced rather wildly at Mr. Mayfield, but he was no longer talking about her. He was pointing with his stick at an old woman carrying two buckets of water along the lane. When she came abreast of them, he roared at her.

"Shouldn't do it, Mrs. Elder. Do yerself an injury. How's the rheumatism?"

"Middling, sir. I can't complain. 'Tis all this rainy weather we had in the winter."

"Get on with you! You're good for fifty years more. Wait till yer my age. It ain't the weather, it's Anno Domini, that's what it is. Feel it in me bones. The knacker's cart round the corner. Good day to you."

Georgia was attracted by this rumbustious old man, in his flat-topped hard hat, yellow waistcoat, slit-tailed check coat, and jodhpurs. He was a character. But it was easy to see, too, how Alice Mayfield's character had been distorted by him. The only daughter—she had four brothers, Georgia was to find—she had been alternately petted and harshly repressed by her father. He wished her to be a simulacrum of his dead wife, a "womanly woman," as Alice bitterly expressed it: while she, brought up in this masculine society, worshipping her brothers and at the same time envying them their freedom, could achieve neither the license of the tomboy nor the placidity of the feminine.

This impression was fixed firmly in Georgia's mind next morning. Waking early in the small, whitewashed bedroom, she slipped on a wrap and went over to the window. In the almost level rays of sunlight, the downs to the west were picked out with such radiant clarity that it almost seemed as if every separate grass-blade stood visible. The hills surged up with a giant sweep on either hand, like Atlantic swells holding house, stables and village tiny and becalmed in their trough. Presently, over the brow of hill on Georgia's right, a horse and rider appeared. A chestnut horse, neck proudly arching as its rider held it on the summit in a statuary pose, the sunlight making a burning bush of the rider's flaxen mop of hair, a beacon on that solitary upland. Yet, for all the glory of the picture she made, there was a dejected droop about Alice Mayfield's shoulders, an air of one on the lookout for a relief that never comes. Motionless up there on the horse's back, gazing southward, she seemed to Georgia an image of "divine discontent."

There was a sentry in her pose, too. Georgia remembered the ghost of Yarnold Farm, and it struck her that here also was a strategic position: a house set in the middle between three R.A.F. aerodromes. A picture came unbidden into her mind. Flights of planes dipping and turning over the Houses of Parliament, while, within, an ultimatum was being delivered. Resign, or——

Irritably she dismissed it from her mind. That was the worst of fighting in the dark—you began to get fancies, to imagine enemies in every corner. The girl up above jerked at her rein: the horse shot forward, swiftly, smoothly, compactly as a torpedo; they were galloping along the ridge, galloping breakneck in a moment down the track towards the sleepy, dazzled village.

"Have you brought good news from Ghent to Aix?" Georgia called out of her bedroom window five minutes later. Alice Mayfield looked up at her, cheeks flushed, white teeth shining in a smile.

"I had a lovely ride. Did you see me up there?"

Yes, thought Georgia, she looks as innocent as the dawn. I must stop imagining things. Yet she was there in that hot room with Señor Alvarez and his associates: she couldn't have got there by accident.

The meeting that evening, when Georgia was initiated into the English Banner, was no less innocent either, for all its oddity. Mr. Mayfield attended, though grumbling audibly beforehand about "all this tomfoolery of Alice's." Two of his sons, florid, well set up young men; one or two neighbouring farmers, a little overawed beneath their appearance of stolidity; a few "county" young things, larky and disrespectful; a parson; the head stable-boy, a gnarled, bow-legged, gum-chewing wisp of a man; Georgia's two fellow-guests—a landowner from another part of the district, and his wife; and a few R.A.F. officers, slick-haired, unobtrusive, talking their own language.

Proceedings opened with a ceremony, conducted by Alice's elder brother, Robert, who assumed for the occasion the robe and title of "Chief Banneret." The ceremony had that atmosphere of crankiness, make-believe and rather seedy mysticism which is apt to come over a religion or idea in its decadence. Georgia's chief feeling was one of embarrassed apprehension—the kind of apprehension one might feel at a séance lest the medium should misfire, or watching some pathetic old trouper in a travelling vaudeville trying to reproduce the talent of his palmy days. This part of the ceremony concluded with Georgia's induction.

"Do you believe in the principle of aristocracy, the rule and government of the Superior Person?" she was asked.

"Do you believe in the hereditary line of true aristocrats?"

"Do you believe in the privilege and responsibility of the Superior Caste?"

And so on.

Georgia contrived to keep a straight face, and was duly made a member of the English Banner. She was interested to note that she did not receive a disk such as Nigel had found in the locket: Sir John had evidently been right in saying that these disks were only current among the real conspirators. A sudden wave of homesickness came over her: she wanted to be able to tell Nigel all about this absurd ceremony, to hear his explosive laughter: nothing here seemed real at all.

After the ceremony was over, the Round Table took place. This high-flown title, Georgia discovered, meant nothing more than sitting round a table and airing grievances about the government, the servant-problem, the "crippling weight of taxation," the Socialist Party, the iniquity of hikers, speculative builders and tradesmen, the debasement of modern art, empty churches, football pools, chemical beer, birth-control, and other allied subjects. It was all very tedious and laughable, but at the same time one could see what admirably troubled waters the English Banner provided for the real conspirators to fish in.

Next morning, however, Alice Mayfield took her for a ride before breakfast, and it was high up on the downland, looking over the Sunday calm of fields and villages, that Georgia was at last admitted to the secret which had evaded her so long. They had reined in their horses to admire the view, and Alice suddenly asked her what she'd thought about the meeting of the English Banner.

"Do you want me to be polite or honest?" asked Georgia, seeing her opportunity.

"I hate people being polite."

"Very well, then. I thought it was a ridiculous piece of hocus-pocus. Not the idea itself—I wouldn't have joined if I'd thought that. But all the talk, talk, talk. So utterly peevish and feeble. Why don't they *do* something about it, instead of whining all the time? 'Aristocrats' whining over their silly little grievances. Haven't they any guts? Your brothers look as if they have, but they just jabbered away with the rest like a couple of Croatian café-conspirators. What a pitiful spectacle we were, complaining about the way democracy is ruining the Empire, telling each other how marvellous we are—born to rule, and the rest of it, and then just sitting back on our haunches! Heaven preserve me from that kind of self-righteous, do-nothing smugness."

Alice Mayfield was stung, as Georgia had intended, by the contemptuous reference to her brothers.

"We're not so futile as you think," she said indignantly. "Not all of us. Not Robert and Dennis. Or me. We're helping to get things done."

"Really? Writing letters to the *Times,* or what?"

Alice was white about the nostrils, but she controlled her voice. "What would you say if I told you that in less than a year's time, we'd have swept away the democrats in Britain and set up a real leader, a real leadership?"

"I'd say you were dreaming. A pleasant dream though."

"Would you come in? Our inner council believe you'd be invaluable."

"You bet I'd come in, if I thought you had any chance of success. I don't go on expeditions that are forlorn hopes, you know. Who is this leader, anyway?"

"I shouldn't be allowed to tell you, even if I knew. Only half a dozen people in the movement know his name."

"That's buying a pig in a poke, isn't it? How can you tell whether he's any good?"

"He's planned the whole thing—that's how we can tell. The organization is simply amazing: only a great man could have done it."

Can this be true? Georgia asked herself. A movement with an anonymous genius behind it? Maybe Alice was stalling her off: it was not likely, after all, that a stranger would be entrusted with such vital information at the start. Yet she could have sworn the girl was telling the truth, or at least believed it to be true that the identity of the future dictator was only known to the leaders of the movement. And if this *was* true, it fitted in with everything Sir John had told her about the conspiracy. It minimized the greatest danger to which such conspiracies are open—the danger of the informer. Yet, in another way, it made it more vulnerable: for, if only one could find out who this arch-traitor was, one would kill with a single stone both the genius and the figurehead of the organization.

Georgia was careful to maintain her attitude of scepticism, but allowed herself to seem gradually more impressed by Alice Mayfield's enthusiasm. It soon became evident from her account that the movement was, as Sir John had suspected, divided into a multiplicity of water-tight cells, so that a leakage would do the minimum of damage. Britain was divided up into six districts, each with its own organizer; each district, in turn, was composed of a large number of self-contained groups—the sub-districts, whose members for the most part had no knowledge of the membership or specific tasks of any other group. Alice Mayfield's job, Georgia imagined, was to keep contact between the Berkshire group and some of the "inner council" in London. It was for this purpose, no doubt, that she had been present in Señor Alvarez' club.

"You say the inner council think I could be some use. Did they ask you to approach me, or was it your own idea? I should have thought they'd be rather suspicious of me—after all, I did marry into the police, so to speak."

"Good lord, I wouldn't have approached you unless I'd been told to. Our movement doesn't encourage its members to be indiscreet. You've been thoroughly investigated already."

It was not till the whole affair was over that Georgia learnt how thorough this investigation had been. And the cream of the joke was that it had been initiated by Sir John Strangeways himself. A month after her first visit to the Thameford County Club, he had taken aside one of his own men—a detective-inspector of the political branch whom he had good reason for believing a member of the secret organization himself, told him confidentially that some rather strange reports about Mrs. Nigel Strangeways had reached his ears lately, said she had refused to see him or explain herself, and asked the inspector to look into these rumours as tactfully as possible. The inspector, immediately reporting this to his local organizer of the E.B., was ordered to carry on with the investigation, just as Sir John had ordered, and convey any information he might obtain to the E.B. This achieved Sir John's object, which was to disassociate Georgia from himself, and at the same time got the E.B. interested in her. Her flat was searched. The letters from Nigel, proving that the break between them was final, were discovered. And, before long, the pro-Fascist tendencies she had so sedulously been showing came to the ears of the E.B. too.

Her first conversation with Alice Mayfield did the rest. Here was a celebrated, influential woman, evidently at a loose end, discontented with her present existence, disillusioned with the democratic régime: she was just the type that the E.B. could use. But the leaders of the movement, though they had all the confidence of men who are backed by unlimited money and allured by the prospect of almost unlimited power, did not take people on trust. They were very thorough, and this thoroughness was to bring Georgia to the very edge of disaster.

Chapter 8

The Episode of the Proof-Copy

That summer brought a long heat-wave. On the fast wickets Peter Braithwaite flourished, runs flowing from his bat as inexhaustibly as the oil from the widow's cruse. At Ascot and Hurlingham, the balls and garden-parties and functions of the season, Alison Grove went gaily about her business. In thousands of offices, factories, slum-streets the workers sweltered, looking forward to their brief August holiday. Behind and within all these normal scenes, like red and white corpuscles battling invisibly in the blood, the secret warfare between Sir John Strangeways' agents and the conspirators continued. It was a warfare without rules or mercy on either side. Even those who were engaged, apart from the general staffs, knew nothing of the battle but their own sector. In one sense, indeed, the battle had scarcely begun: at present there was only the manoeuvring for position, the skirmishing between outposts. Yet her isolation made Georgia feel like a combatant holding one yard of a line that stretched right across Britain, who had nothing but rumours to tell her how her comrades were faring.

Reading the papers, she gleaned vague hints of the E.B. offensive. An atmosphere of uneasiness was gradually, skilfully being created in the country. The Stock Exchange was restive, securities fluctuating for no apparent reason, like the disquieted air before a storm. Certain reactionary newspapers, without committing themselves too far, began adopting a new tone of scepticism about parliamentary government. Certain prominent men, in after-dinner speeches, in clubs, at school speech-days or the laying of foundation-stones, pleaded for closer collaboration with the totalitarian powers. The seeds of doubt and discord were being sown, like the tares in the parable, while England slept. There were other things, too—mysterious disappearances, unexplained suicides—the casualties of this subterranean warfare. Reading between the lines, Georgia could see the skill with which the E.B. was leading up to an atmosphere of crisis, was seeking to demolish little by little the Englishman's confidence in democratic institutions.

She herself, as a member of one of the London groups of the organization, was given the task of winning adherents to the movement from among her acquaintances—a task which exacted all her strength of mind, for it led in most cases to polite estrangement or positive hostility. But, knowing that the E.B. were testing her thus, she went through it unflinchingly. She had been told to give implicit obedience to any one who showed her an E.B. badge—a disk such as she had found in the locket; these were held only by the six district organizers, the inner council: but no one had yet done so, and she began to despair of penetrating further into the movement.

The necessity of wearing this detestable mask in public, the fearful strain of working for one side and at the same time appearing to work loyally for the other, began to tell on her nerves. She was glad therefore when she received an invitation to visit the Mayfields again—glad as an exhausted fighter might be when sent to a quieter part of the line. At least, one might have supposed it would be quieter . . .

There was a new light in Alice Mayfield's eye, a suppressed excitement in her bearing, that were soon explained when she told Georgia that Lord Chilton Canteloe was to be one of the house-party. Georgia was excited, too. She was beginning to get ideas about this rich playboy and it would be interesting to verify them.

"Chillie," however, was not arriving till next day, and all thought of him was put out of Georgia's head by an incident that occurred as soon as they reached Mayfield's house. "Better come and pay your respects to Daddy," Alice said. "I wonder where he's got to?" They found him at last in his study, a room where he looked as little at home as would one of his own horses. His flat-topped hat lay on the desk beside him; there was a pencil in his hand, and he seemed so absorbed in a paper-covered book he was reading that he did not at first hear them come in.

"Hello, Daddy. I've——"

"What the devil? What d'yer mean by bursting in like— Oh, beg pardon, Mrs. Strangeways. Didn't see yer. How de do? Devilish hot today."

The old man had risen to his feet, slipping the book with remarkable dexterity under a sheaf of papers. It was while he pumped her hand vigorously up and down that Georgia remembered Alison saying, last time she had been here, "Daddy read a book! I should laugh. The book of form's the only one he ever opens." And this book—the glimpse she'd had of it—didn't look in the least like that invaluable work of reference. It was surely an ordinary proof-copy? Which made it odder still. For, if

Mr. Mayfield never read a book, one might reasonably suppose it improbable that he had written one.

Georgia had no comment upon it at the moment; but later, when Alice was helping her to unpack, she remarked lightly:

"I didn't know your father was an author."

"An author? But of course he isn't! What makes you think——?"

"I thought he was going over a proof-copy just now."

There was a moment's pause before the girl replied, "Oh, that. No. Some publisher sent it to him. Asked him for his opinion of it. I suppose they want it for an advertisement. They send him books now and then like that— ones that are up his street, racing reminiscences and so on. He hardly ever looks at them, though, as far as I know. I suppose this one must have been written by a friend of his."

It sounded plausible enough on the surface. Georgia was well acquainted with some publishers' habit of sending out books to well-known people before publication, soliciting their opinion and angling thus for a little free publicity. They usually sent finished copies, not bound proofs, it was true; but not invariably. On the other hand, why should old Mr. Mayfield have whisked the book out of sight when they entered? He surely would not carry his robust contempt for literature to the point of such acute shame at being caught out in company with a book?

While she dressed for dinner, this curious little incident nagged at Georgia's mind. That she didn't tumble to its explanation sooner was due to her having never thought of George Mayfield in connection with the conspiracy. Alice and her brothers, yes. But their father, with his beloved horses, his quaint eccentricities, his one-track mind, seemed infinitely remote from the ambitions and subterfuges of the E.B. Yet it was odd about that proof-copy. It was not in character. And for anything out of character Georgia had an unerring eye. She was in the act of laying a trace of rouge along her cheekbones when it dawned upon her that here perhaps was the clue she had been seeking. What an admirable method of communication between the chief conspirators these proof-copies would be!

They might well expect their correspondence to be opened by John Strangeways' men. At least, it would be dangerous to send their most vital communications through the post, even in code: there was no code that could not be broken down nowadays. But who would think of intercepting a book, sent out by a reputable publisher with a request that the recipient should express his opinion on it? And, in a book of 100,000 words, there were enough combinations to baffle the most experienced cryptographer, even supposing the police tumbled to the trick. The publisher himself might well be above suspicion. It only needed a member of the E.B. in his office to get hold of a copy and send it out, indicating the vital words or letters in some pre-arranged manner.

Scarcely had the idea blazed up in Georgia's mind when reaction set in. What a fool I am! It's no good, she argued. However large and diverse a publisher's list, he would never at one given time have ready for publication enough books on different subjects to enable this method to be used. Besides, if I wasn't so jumpy that I suspect everyone and everything, I'd surely admit that the leaders of the E.B. have no need yet for such elaborate tricks: there's nothing, after all, to stop them meeting each other.

No, the whole idea was fantastic. Yet Georgia was impelled by a desire to prove it so, as a child waking from nightmare is driven to investigate the wardrobe he has dreamed full of unspeakable things—just to make sure. She determined somehow or other to get a good look at Mr. Mayfield's proof-copy.

The next day, just before lunch-time, Lord Chilton Canteloe arrive. All that morning a restlessness, a sense of expectancy had hung over the house-party; Georgia felt its atmosphere both flat and keyed-up, like the electric air before a tropical hurricane: the guests move about aimlessly, talked with spasmodic animation, then fell unaccountably silent, as though little wafted winds—precursors of a storm—were eddying through the house. Alice Mayfield was distrait, breaking off in the middle of a conversation to stare in front of her with unseeing eyes. Her father's voice could be heard outside as he cursed a stable-boy for some trivial misdemeanour. Lady Rissington, that famous beauty, whom Alison Grove had nicknamed "The Ever-Open Door," preened herself nervously at every available mirror. How absurd, thought Georgia, that one man should be able to create this extraordinary atmospheric disturbance, even though he is a millionaire and God's gift to yearning womankind.

And then, while they were all drinking cocktails in the L-shaped drawing-room whose windows looked on to the downs that folded their long shadows about them like wings and slept in the noonday sunshine, Chilton Canteloe appeared. He was in his middle forties, but looked younger than his age: he had the hyacinth-curling hair, the straight nose, the small, firm mouth of a Greek statue: his beauty of feature, Georgia had to admit, was superlative and of the kind that never seems to age: there was no trace of insolence or dissipation in the deep-set, audacious eyes that roved with interest among the company. "Hello, Chillie!" they all greeted him, and there was a stir and settling-down in the room as though some volcanic disturbance had taken place, cleared the air, altered every relationship there. Alice Mayfield was bringing him over to her. Georgia noticed with surprise and a vague sense of comfort that his gait lacked the incomparable grace of his head and shoulders: he walked a little clumsily, leaning forward, his arms swinging stiffly in front of him, rather like a bear; and this flaw in his physical perfection made him, paradoxically, more real for her, more homely and likable. There was something both shy and challenging in the look he gave her as they shook hands. "Well, what do *you* think about me?" it seemed to ask. She felt the full force of his personality directed for a moment upon her, isolating them from all the others in the room.

"This *is* nice," he said. "I've always wanted to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

There was not a hint of patronizing or of conventional falseness about it. His smile, boyish yet confident, created a kind of complicity between them, as though they were old friends meeting in a room full of strangers.

"Yes," said Georgia coolly, on an impulse, "we both like taking risks. We have that much in common, anyway."

She was aware of a small, stifled movement at her side. Alice Mayfield was not used to seeing her idol treated so familiarly. Or perhaps she felt a twinge of jealousy, perceiving in the words of those two the first flick and jar of rapiers, steel on steel, between two opponents who at the first touch recognize each other's quality.

"Taking risks?" said Chilton. "I thought you'd retired from active service. Are you planning another expedition?"

"Well, no. It's so exciting in England just now, isn't it? I feel we're on the edge of great events, somehow. The stay-at-homes will see the fun this time."

Gazing frankly into his face, she could find no trace of discomposure. Well, why should there be? There was no recognizable trace of the features of the woman in the locket, either. If she had hoped to force the issue, she had certainly failed.

Chilton laughed. "You sound as if you were going to start up a revolution or something. Yes, I think you'd make a good Joan of Arc."

"Well, if I do, you'll have to finance it. Voices aren't enough nowadays. But seriously, with all this international tension, something's bound to break before long, don't you think? What's the feeling in Germany now? I haven't been there for a couple of years."

"They're scared. Like us. Only they shout a good deal louder to hide it.

But what do you mean by saying that the stay-at-homes would see the fun this time?"

Silently Georgia pointed through the window. A flight of bombers was crawling low across the sky.

"That's not my idea of fun," said Chilton Canteloe. But he said it perfunctorily; and Georgia, seeing the absorbed gleam in his eyes as they followed the bombers' course, felt an irrational conviction that he would indeed take a savage, childish delight in the blast, the mushroom smoke, the houses crumbling to rubble—the mere spectacle of destruction.

"I'd love it," Alice Mayfield said. "I know it sounds awful, but think of the sense of power, up there, fighting like gods in the air. I mean, bombing's pretty foul, but——"

"Alice is a blood-thirsty child," Chilton said. "A romantic with a taste for blood is a real terror. She ought to become a hospital nurse—that's the best cure."

Alice blushed, glanced angrily at Georgia as though she, not Chilton, had uttered those flippant, wounding words. Georgia was a little shocked at them too. Chilton, who evidently was a man of breeding and sensibility, could not have failed to realize how they would hurt the girl. That he could treat her with such teasing contempt argued some streak of cruelty, or at least of irresponsibility, in his nature. Well, he was a millionaire: men did not accumulate all that money without hurting a lot of people, one way or another.

"Weren't you a bit hard on her?" she said, when Alice had moved away.

Chilton eyed her curiously, almost as if deciding what reply would please her most. "I have to, sometimes. It'll be happier for her in the end if I've kept her—well—at arm's length. Don't you think so?"

"When a girl like that is in love, she'll thrive on rebuffs. She'll make herself believe that they show there's some response on your side. Indifference is the only thing for her."

"But supposing I'm not indifferent?"

Georgia shrugged her shoulders. "Then there's no more to be said."

Only afterwards did it strike her how odd this conversation was between two people who had never met each other before. If there was such a thing as love at first sight, perhaps there could be hate at first sight too, creating the same instant intimacy. Yet she had no reason to hate Chilton Canteloe: indeed, she found him charming and sympathetic. Now she had met him, she realized how admirably he qualified for the position of leader of the E.B. conspiracy. She had faced the naked light of his intelligence, his charm and force of character: she knew now at first hand what it was that dazzled his countrymen. But she had not the least reason for suspecting that he was associated with the conspirators. Her shock tactics during their first conversation had not gained one inch of ground. Moreover, she argued, if that proof-copy I caught old Mr. Mayfield reading is really one channel by which the leaders of the E.B. communicate with each other, Lord Canteloe must be considered out of it. If he wanted to send orders down here without attracting suspicion, he need only work out some code to be used in the correspondence he would quite naturally keep up with his trainer. It's fantastic to suppose that he would adopt this round-about proof-copy method.

There was no use milling around in her mind till she had seen the book, however. That night, when the guests were in bed and the house quiet, she crept out of her room. She found her way to Mr. Mayfield's study. She was prepared to spend some time looking for the hiding place of the book, but it was there on the desk, under the papers where he had slipped it yesterday morning. Returning to her room, Georgia got into bed, flicked on her electric torch again, and began to study the proof-copy. *Fifty Years of the Turf.* One of the usual publisher's slips inside: "With the compliments of Eason, Swayne, Ltd. To be published on September 5."

Rapidly she turned over the pages. If Mr. Mayfield was reckless enough to leave this book about on his desk, he might even have put a mark on the relevant page. No luck there. Nor did there seem to be anything phoney about the text. An hour passed, and Georgia began to despair. Somehow or other, the person who had sent the book to Mr. Mayfield must have conveyed some code with it. Yet, if the object was to avoid suspicion, in case of the parcel's falling into the wrong hands, he would not have dared to put in an enclosure with it. Enclosure? Oh hell! Georgia muttered: the usual covering letter that publishers send out with their complimentary copies. Why didn't I think of that? Such a letter often has a reference number, and by this means Mr. Mayfield's attention could be drawn to the right page. And now that letter has been destroyed, no doubt. Mr. Mayfield could safely leave the book about: it was a harmless to him now as a bomb with the detonator removed. Georgia was getting out of bed, to restore the book to Mr. Mayfield's study, when the publisher's slip dropped out of its pages. She bent down, and suddenly the slip seemed to stand out unnaturally large before her eyes. September 5. Publishers rarely had proofs ready so long before the date of publication. Could this be the clue she was searching for?

She turned to page five, read it word by word, examined it carefully, held it up against the light of the torch. No, there was nothing there. Try September. The ninth month of the year. She turned to page nine, page ninety, page ninety-nine, but in vain. She had a feeling, though, that she must be growing warm. Multiply the number of the month by the date. Five nines makes forty-five. And on page forty-five, sure enough, she found it. Beneath certain letters there were faint indentations, made perhaps by pressing a blunted point of metal on the paper: they were invisible to the eye, but her sensitive finger-tips could feel them. She spelt out the letters, and it was as if the atrocious crime they spelt was taking shape in her own head.

"Wildiedangerousarrangeaccidenturgent."

It was enough. Georgia crept out again, replaced the proof-copy where she had found it, and returned silently to her bedroom. Lucky that it was she who had tumbled to this. No one else might have been able to interpret it. "Wildie" was the nickname of one of the R.A.F. officers who had been present at the English Banner's meeting during her first visit here. Wildman: a square-faced, blue-eyed lad—a bit of a James Cagney to look at. Evidently he had become dangerous to the E.B. conspirators in some way: perhaps, like the unfortunate Rosa Alvarez, he had merely been indiscreet: or perhaps he was another of Sir John Strangeways' agents who had found his way into the movement and been discovered. At any rate, the E.B. centre had told the Mayfields to arrange an accident. They had contacts in the aerodrome, no doubt. A mechanic in their pay. It was damnably easy. "Arrange accident urgent." Nothing had happened yet. Alice Mayfield had mentioned Wildie's name last night. She had said—oh, God!—she had said that Wildie was giving a display of aerobatics at Hartgrove Aerodrome tomorrow afternoon. There was to be a big air-pageant there, and the whole house-party would be driving over to watch it.

For hours, till the sky paled with dawn and the first impassioned chorus of birds began, Georgia sat propped up in bed, thinking, planning against time. Once again she had become arbiter of life and death. It should be comparatively easy to warn young Wildman of what was coming to him: but, if she did and the "accident" were averted, suspicion would at once fall upon her. She had showed curiosity about the proof-copy from the start. The E.B. would deduce that she had read it and warned Wildman. Her own life, from that moment, wouldn't be worth a farthing. She did not mind this so much: what worried her to desperation was that her last chance of reaching the central secret of the E.B., to which she was now so close, would be irretrievably lost. It was a young airman's life against the lives of millions—the life of England. If only Nigel were here, or Sir John, to advise her! She felt the responsibility pressing upon her with the suffocating weight of a nightmare.

At last, when the faint gleam of dawn shone on the window-panes, she began to see light. She knew what she must do. The whole affair, in a sudden gleam of enlightenment, took on a changed complexion. A risk would have to be taken. If she failed, if her calculations went wrong, she would be a murderess. So be it.

With the fatalism and aplomb of the seasoned campaigner, who has made a decision and knows it irrevocable, Georgia Strangeways turned over in bed and went to sleep.

Chapter 9

The Episode of the Nebuchadnezzar

Hartgrove Aerodrome lies on a plateau of the downs, extending over many acres of turf which has been laid and levelled so that from a distance it resembles the fairway of a golf course. The landing-speed of the pursuit planes stationed at Hartgrove is so great that they need a smooth run to ensure safety. This Sunday afternoon, clouds bowled across overhead, trundling their great shadows along the expanse of the downs, while in their intervals the sun shone down on the brick-red hangars, the neat houses where officers and men lived, the roadway bordering the flying field, now lined with cars whose enamel and chromium flashed back the sunlight. On the field's southern edge the spectators were arrayed, their talk mingling with the humming engines of a flight of silver planes that stood in the centre of the field, air-screws flickering, ready to go up for formation-flying. Mechanics and officers strolled about, in blue uniforms or white overalls, giving the whole scene a gala air. No one but herself, thought Georgia, seemed to pay attention to the motor-ambulance and fire-engine which faced them on the far side of the aerodrome, small as toys.

She must give no sign of what she knew. She must concentrate all her forces on playing the part of a woman who has come to see an air display, who is used to danger, who is not expecting death. For they were watching her: she was certain of it. It had been proved this morning. She would not, in any case, have dared to telephone from the house to the aerodrome: that was too risky. But, when she had gone out after breakfast, Robert Mayfield had fallen into step beside her, offered to post the letter she carried in her hand and save her the trouble of walking into the village. "Oh, no thanks," she said, "I'd like a little walk." Robert stared down at her, his expression both puzzled and obstinate. "Well, we'll both go." He was going to be present if she should telephone from the post-office. And that, she thought now, might mean one of two things. And, if it didn't mean what she thought it did, she was about to kill an innocent man.

A loud speaker boomed hollowly across the ground. There was a crescendo of engines. The silver flight leapt forward, raced over the sward, launched imperceptibly into the air, and made a great climbing sweep like pigeons released. Attaining height, they frolicked about in the sky, moving all together as if some bird-like instinct directed each dip and turn and dive. Georgia watched them, fascinated, her fears forgotten for a moment. Then she felt a hand on her elbow. Alice Mayfield was saying, "You met Wildie last time, didn't you?"—and she was looking into the sparky blue eyes of the young officer. They talked idly for a few minutes. She noticed the slender strength of his wrists, imagined them tugging vainly at some jammed control while his plane went spinning about his ears like a catherine-wheel. She had only to say the word now. The others, Chilton, the Mayfields, Lady Rissington were grouped at a little distance, almost—she thought—as if by common consent they wished to offer Wildman this last chance. She saw Chilton giving her a curious, measured scrutiny. With an effort that seemed to drain all the blood out of her body, she kept the conventional expression on her face, maintained the slight, conventional talk. She knew she could stand very little more of this. Then, at the very moment when her hands were going out of their own accord in an imploring gesture to Wildman, a great, rising whine came down at them out of the sky.

The silver flight, still locked together in formation, had gone into a power-dive. They dropped shrieking from the high clouds, down and down, faster than falling, as if some god—angry at their presumptuous sporting in heaven's face—had seized them up in his fist and flung them down at the earth like a handful of shining pebbles. They came at the field like meteors. And then, at the moment when the eye already saw them plunged deep into the earth's heart, they swerved up and away in a roaring curve.

"That was wonderful," Georgia exclaimed. But young Wildman had left her side: she could see him strolling across to a solitary, yellow plane that stood on the concrete outside one of the hangars.

"What a nice young chap he is," she said to Alice. The girl's eyes swerved away from hers. "Oh, yes. Yes, he is." Chilton Canteloe was watching them both, Georgia noticed, with the guarded, whimsical, slightly superior air of a man watching two women who may any moment break into a furious quarrel. It flashed over her mind that Chillie was not, in any case, absolved from suspicion of the proof-copy. Alice told her once that only the six district organizers of the E.B. knew the identity of its leader. It might be true. There was a certain bravado about

Chillie, a boyish delight in the theatrical, which might lead him on to consorting incognito—like the young king in the romances—with his own followers. It would tickle him, she imagined, to send out orders that Wildman be killed, and then come down to watch the reactions of the executioners.

"Well, there he goes," Chilton said to her. "Good luck to him."

The yellow plane floated away off the ground.

"I hope nothing happens to him," said Georgia, looking up seriously into Chilton's face.

"Why should anything happen to him?"

"Well, stunting puts a terrific strain on the machine, doesn't it?"

"Oh, well, they go over every inch of it beforehand, you know."

The crowd gasped. You could hear the sigh above the drum of the engine. Wildman was taking his plane along, a few feet above the ground, one wing depressed, like a broken-winged bird trying to scuttle away from the guns. Presently he straightened, rose up almost on his tail and gained height. It was as if the plane were romping and tumbling with some invisible playmate up there. Skidding, sidling, wobbling, somersaulting—the most amazing exhibiting of crazy flying Georgia had ever seen. If something was going to happen, it must happen soon. The terrible stresses to which Wildman's airy clowning subjected his machine would find out any weakened spot: she could feel those stresses within her own body, tearing her apart centrifugally.

"God!" someone exclaimed. "He can make that kite talk."

Lady Rissington, that languorous, bored beauty, gave a little cry. Young Wildman went into a spin. Georgia glanced up to Chilton Canteloe. He was gazing fixedly, not at the plane, but at herself. She did not bother to decipher his expression: she knew now for certain what it meant. Controlling her voice with a last effort, putting the faintest note of apprehension into its casual tone, she remarked:

"Surely he's cutting it a bit fine, isn't he?"

Young Wildman was certainly cutting it fine. His plane was still spinning down, helpless and silent as a dead, yellow leaf, to the very furthest margin of safety. But Georgia's heart was singing. Her ordeal was over. Wildman was safe: he had never been in danger, except from his own audacity. She had callen the E.B.'s bluff, staked that brilliant airman's life on its being a bluff, and won the show-down. She hardly heard the roars of applause as he cut in his engine and pulled the plane out of her spin.

Driving back in Chilton's car after the display was over, she remembered most the tension on the faces of Robert and Alice Mayfield before Wildman had gone up, and the way Chilton had been looking at her when every other eye on the field was hypnotized by the weaving plane. Last night she had come to the conclusion that the whole business of the proof-copy must mean a stratagem directed, not against Wildman, but against herself. Her attention had been called to it a little too blatantly at the start. Had it been a genuine message from the E.B., Mr. Mayfield would never have left it lying so ingenuously on his desk. Nor would the clues to such a diabolic plan have been so simple, or the plan itself so nakedly set out. The E.B. had still been suspicious of her. The Mayfields had arranged that, if she were indeed a spy, she should be made inquisitive about the proof-copy, and discover its secret. They had watched her like lynxes then, to see if she passed on a warning to Wildman: Wildman might even be in the know himself. Well, she had survived the ordeal, had given no sign that she had read the message in the proof-copy, or that—if she had read it—she wished to obstruct their plans. They could doubt her allegiance no longer. But it was neither this, nor her relief at not having sent a man to his death, which made Georgia so vivacious at dinner that evening. She felt a wild, half-incredulous excitement, as a hunter might who has come upon the spoor of some legendary animal . . .

When the week-end party broke up, Georgia returned to London and sought out Alison Grove. She recounted in detail the events that had taken place at the Mayfields'.

"Things don't seem to have been too cosy for you," said Alison. "Well, I'll pass it on to Sir John. Poor dear, he's still very worried, and I don't see this is going to help him much."

"You don't? The heat must have curdled your brains, darling."

"Schoolgirl abuse! Why *are* you so cock-a-hoop?"

"Chillie's asked me to stay at his place next month."

"You don't let the grass grow beneath your feet, do you? But what about it?"

"Just this. I think Chillie's our man."

Alison's blue eyes opened wide. "Oh, no! Now that's too much! You can't make me believe—why, he's got everything already. He's got money, power, immense popularity. A man like that would never risk it all for——"

"When that young chap Wildman was doing his stunts, Chillie had eyes only for your humble servant," said Georgia stubbornly.

"He's probably fallen for you."

"Oh, dear no! Chillie's more fallen for than falling, and you know it.

He was watching me to see how I'd take it. I'm never mistaken about a thing like that. Which means that he knew about the proof-copy and the plan to make me give myself away. Which means that he's in the E.B. movement himself. But Chillie wouldn't play second fiddle in any show, and he has all the qualifications Sir John and Nigel proposed for the leader of the movement."

"You're dreaming. He's just a playboy at heart."

"Yes. And that's why he's so successful and so dangerous." said Georgia very seriously. "Life's just a game to him, maybe but he likes making the rules himself, and he has the money to make them, too. Now listen. You can help me here. I want to put over a little test. It won't absolutely prove anything, whether it comes off or fails, but it may give me another bit of probability. This is what you've got to do . . ."

Mrs. Ryle's parties were famous. She had been one of the "Bright Young Things" of the twenties, and fifteen years of happy marriage to John Ryle, now a Cabinet Minister, had not taken the edge off her larkiness. There was nothing she liked better than to invite a number of maliciously ill-assorted guests, play them off against each other and watch the repercussions. She was also fond of putting the most self-important people through the hoop: indeed, she had a way with her that made them almost enjoy the circus themselves.

This evening, after dinner was over, she announced in her most robust tones, "We're going to play Nebuchadnezzar. John, you pick one side, and I'll choose the other."

An elderly gentleman, permanent head of a Civil Service department, stirred uneasily. "Nebuchadnezzar? What is that, Mrs. Ryle? I hope you're not expecting me to eat grass?"

"I'm sure the hay diet would be very good for you, my dear. But we'll let you off this time. Nebuchadnezzar is a kind of charade. We all played it like mad when I was a foolish young girl."

"A charade? Oh, but really, Mrs. Ryle——"

"Now, don't start making a thing about it," she said firmly. "Nobody could reach your position in Whitehall without being a born actor. Besides, you'll be all right, you don't have to *say* anything. It's a dumb charade. Just the thing for the Silent Service."

Quelled by this flow of rather sinister compliments, Sir Thomas Park allowed himself to be led out with the rest of Mrs. Ryle's team.

"Now then," she said remorselessly when they were outside. "The word will be Abel. We'll finish with a Cain and Abel scene. What about A? Agag? Artemis? Absalom? All a bit threadbare."

"St. Athanasius," suggested Chilton Canteloe.

"My dear man, what do you know about St. Athanasius?"

"Nothing. But I can easily imagine it. Park could appear as Athanasius, dictating his creed, while three of us——"

"No. I don't think that would be at all historical. Besides, the bishop might object."

"Alcibiades, then. A scene from his private life. That would knock them."

"It sounds rather risqué to me. Platonic love is one thing, and Socratic love another. Still, art should have no frontiers. We'll settle on that. Abel. B. What about the B?"

"Browning," piped up Sir Thomas unexpectedly. "A rattling good play that was. What the devil was it called? 'The Brownings of Wimpole Street,' that's it."

"Barretts, dear, Barretts. Yes, that'll do. I," Mrs. Ryle added masterfully, "will play the part of Mr. Barrett."

After the usual flippant wrangling, the rest of the word was disposed of. The first scene having been played out with considerable *réclame,* Mrs. Ryle's side retired to make ready for the second. Their leader threw open the cupboard of theatrical properties. "Elizabeth Barrett must have some sort of wig," she said. "This'll do, perhaps." She took out a heavy, ringleted affair and tried it on Sir Thomas Park. "No, my dear. Nothing could make you look like an invalid poetess." She tried it on two of the women: then on Chilton Canteloe. "Ah, that's better. You're Elizabeth B. Now go and swathe yourself up in this lace. Run along. And don't forget to put some powder on. The canary of Wimpole Street was not suntanned. Sir Thomas, you will sustain the rôle of Robert Browning: you must be suave, but passionate: success is your middle name, remember."

"I always think Browning was a bit of a bounder," replied Sir Thomas.

"I'll leave you to bring out the nuances of the character. Now for the rest of you . . ."

The Barrett-Browning scene was always remembered, by those who had been present, as Mrs. Ryle's greatest triumph. Ably seconded by a corpse-pale but winsome Elizabeth, and Sir Thomas' wonderfully caddish Browning, she gave Mr. Barrett full value. She sneered, rampaged, snubbed, exuded the very essence of patriarchal tyranny. Even a maid, who had peeped in at the drawing-room door with a message for her mistress, was held spellbound and evidently so affected by the scene that she entirely forgot to deliver the message.

Not merely forgot the message, but after watching for a few moments through the slightly-opened door, slipped away, took off cap and apron, and emerged from the house as Georgia Strangeways. Much as she had admired Mrs. Ryle's rendering, it was not Mrs. Ryle she had come to look at. She had come to look at Chilton Canteloe, wearing a wig of black hair parted in the middle, with ringlets falling to the shoulders. And she had seen his face amazingly transformed thus into the face of the woman whose picture was in the locket claimed by Major Keston. There could be no mistaking it. The link was made at last. It was just conceivable that some unknown X might be the real owner of the locket, might have picked up that daguerreotype by chance and used it to conceal the E.B. disk: but, in view of what Georgia knew about Chilton, this must be considered too much of a coincidence.

In the taxi, Georgia was exultant, yet a little worried. The question was —had Pamela Ryle and Thomas Park carried it off without raising Chilton's suspicion? Had there been any difficulty in getting him to wear that wig? Alison would tell her tomorrow. It was Alison who had suggested to her friend Mrs. Ryle the plan by which Chilton and the locket should be connected. Pamela Ryle was staunch as oak, Alison knew, beneath her old whims and escapades, and she had been willing to fall in with Alison's suggestion without inquiring too deeply into the reasons for it. Sir Thomas Park was the repository for so many secrets that he could be trusted not to give away even the most apparently insignificant. Mrs. Ryle had asked him privately to suggest Elizabeth Barrett as one of the scenes for the Nebuchadnezzar, for Alison thought the whole thing would thus appear more spontaneous and be less likely to put Chilton Canteloe on his guard.

Indeed, but for the ill-timed enthusiasm of Lady Rissington, who was also at the Ryles' party, everything would have gone off without a hitch. Pamela Ryle had seen to it that the men of her side changed their clothes in her husband's study, where there were no mirrors. There was nothing here to show Chilton his resemblance to his grandmother—the woman in the locket. He was entirely absorbed in his rôle as Elizabeth Barrett, till, when the scene had ended, Lady Rissington rushed up to him out of the audience, took his arm, screaming, "Oh, Chillie, you look positively divine! Do come and look at yourself. It's a knock-out," and led him up to a mirror on the wall.

Chilton Canteloe regarded for a moment the titled, coquettish head with its drooping ringlets, the face that gazed at him out of the mirror, so strange yet so familiar. "Yes, the effect is rather stunning, isn't it?" He turned away, smiling speculatively over Lady Rissington's head at the guests sitting there. He walked out of the room with that lumbering, bear-like gait of his, and found Mrs. Ryle.

"Do you mind if I use your telephone?" he asked. "There's something I forgot to tell my secretary before I came out."

"Of course. You know where it is. You're not on in the next scene, are you?"

Still in wig and Victorian lace, the millionaire went out into the hall. He dialed a number. He spoke quietly:

"Is that you, David? . . . Canteloe speaking. Will you find out where Mrs. Nigel Strangeways was between nine-fifteen and nine-thirty tonight. Also her husband . . . Yes, I know that. Please don't interrupt. Put B20 and B23 onto it. Yes, I want them to start at once. Good-bye."

Chilton returned to the study, took off the wig, stared at it for a few seconds; then, with an expression which few people had ever seen on his face, he twined his fingers almost lovingly in the silky, black hair and, breath hissing through his distended nostrils, began to pull. He did not jerk out the handful of hair. He pulled at it steadily, as if he wished to prolong the torture of some woman whose dark head he was holding down. He went on, steadily pulling, till at last that lock of hair was dragged up by its roots. Then his mouth straightened again, and he took a comb, and began carefully combing the hair over the little bald patch he had made on the wig.

"Those two were the only ones who saw it," he muttered, "unless Keston was lying. Foolish of me . . . still, one can't be too careful. Damn all this caution! It makes me sick. Not for much longer, though."

He went into the next room, smiling with gay, confident charm at Mrs. Ryle and the rest of her side, who were just returning from the third scene of the charade.

Chapter 10

The Episode of the Most Popular Man

Up till now, Georgia had not been able to grasp the full implications of the E.B. There had been moments—the affair of Rosa Alvarez, the sinister episode in Professor Hargreaves Steele's laboratory—when she had felt its breath chill on her neck. Yet even these, by their sheer melodrama, put an aura of unreality around the whole business; while the amateurishness, the cheap-jack reactionary sentiments, the pathetically idealistic or merely disgruntled attitude of the E.B. rank-and-file with whom she herself had been working, prevented her from taking the situation with consistent seriousness. Like many highly intelligent people, Georgia was inclined to under-estimate the enormous potential strength of stupidity. Like herself, millions of men and women in England, though the last ten years had given them so many object lessons in the way a few really determined, unscrupulous men can exploit this stupidity and apathy, were still saying "That sort of thing cannot happen here." Even Georgia, who was seeing it begin to happen, could not quite believe her eyes—so difficult was it for English people of her class to shake from their eyes the scales which long security had grown there. "One has heard of engineers being hoist by their own petards," she said to Nigel when the whole affair was over: "I'd never realized how a nation might be betrayed by the sheer perfection of its defence-mechanisms."

Georgia, however, was brought wide awake at last by two events that occurred shortly after Pamela Ryle's party. The first of these was so trivial that she herself hardly noticed its significance at the time. The second made perhaps the biggest journalistic sensation since the Great War.

The night of the Ryle's party, Georgia got out of her taxi a few hundred yards from her flat, slipped quietly in and went to bed. She had sent her maid out for the evening. She had not been in bed half an hour before there was a ring at the outer door. Slipping on her dressing-gown, she went to answer it. A policeman stood outside, a large, fresh-faced, polite young man, his helmet tucked under his arm.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am," he said. "Saw a chap hurrying down the street just now—he seemed to have come out of this block, so I thought I'd better make sure he hadn't been breaking in anywhere. You heard anything suspicious?"

Minor public school and Hendon Police College stuck out all over the young man's bearing. Georgia screwed up her eyes against the light, passed the back of her hand over her forehead.

"No. I've heard nothing. I've been in bed—a headache, but I'd have heard him if he was in any of the rooms, I think."

The policeman inquired politely whether she had been at home all the evening.

"Yes," she said. "But why should you think this chap was a criminal? And can't you arrest people for loitering with intent?"

"He wasn't loitering, ma'am. Far from it. Came haring past me like a streak. I thought I recognized him, though. And, if he's the chap I believe he is, we can pick him up any time. One of our regulars." The policeman grinned at her. "Suppose your maid didn't hear anything?"

"She's out for the evening."

"Don't mind if I have a look around, do you? Just to make sure."

He went solemnly round the flat, even poking a nose into her bedroom. Finally he took himself off, saying how fearfully sorry he was to have been a nuisance and expressing the hope that her headache would soon be gone. Georgia wrote down the number she had noticed on his uniform. No doubt it was just a coincidence that somebody should be inquiring about her movements on this very evening when it was essential that the E.B. should not know she had been out of the house at all. But, if the young policeman and the suspicious character were fakes, she'd be able to find it out very quickly.

Next morning, when Doris brought in her tea, the girl was evidently excited—and faintly disappointed not to have found her mistress murdered in her bed. The copper had been round to every flat in the building last night, to see if anything was stolen. Loudly Doris lamented that she always missed the fun.

"And was anything stolen?"

"Well, not as you might say stolen. But he nearly caught the burglars, a couple of them, running away. Must have surprised them before they'd got to work properly."

Just another scare, thought Georgia. If my polite young copper had really been an E.B. agent in disguise, he'd never have bothered to go into all the other flats: too dangerous for him, besides: somebody might have recognized he wasn't the regular policeman on this beat, and started talking. Wait a minute, though. Wouldn't he have taken the risk? In order to find out if any of the other occupants of the flats had seen me go out or come in last night? He'd not be apt to take my own word for it that I had not gone out.

"Do you know this policeman, Doris?"

"Oh, yes, m'm. A nice boy, he is. Real superior, too. That Millie, in Number Two—fancies herself, she does, it'd make you laugh—when he went in there last night she tried to get a date out of him—been trying for months now, the artful cat—but nothing doing with our Mr. Robert."

So Millie could vouch for the young policeman. That was that. An over-zealous officer he might be, but not a bogus one. Georgia dismissed him from her mind.

It might never have recurred to her, had not Mrs. Tinsley, the occupant of Number One flat, whom she met by chance in the hall later that morning, begun talking about last night's visitation. The constable, it seemed, had been remarkably pertinacious in his inquiries. Had Mrs. Tinsley heard any movements in the flat above? (The flat above hers was Georgia's.) Had she seen or heard any one going in or out since nine o'clock?

"Of course I hadn't," said Mrs. Tinsley with some heat. "I kept on telling him nobody could have been up in your place—except yourself: you'd come to borrow some aspirin off me and then gone to bed. These young policemen are becoming a menace. They'll do anything for promotion."

Thank heaven our flats don't boast a night-porter, and I made my exits and entrances as quietly as I did, thought Georgia.

At six o'clock that evening Georgia rang up Sir John Strangeways from a friend's house. She was still a little impatient of the precautions that had to be taken in communicating with him, but she followed his instructions meticulously. When they had spoken the code-sentences by which they recognized each other, she said:

"The experiment was successful."

"Good. Well done. You must stick to him now—a lot will depend on you. Find out what his arrangements are. You know."

"I wish you'd keep your policemen out of my hair." Georgia gave him a brief account of the visit yesterday night, and told him the constable's number.

"I'll have inquiries made. Don't trust any one you're not sure of. Well, good luck."

That was all. But it was more than enough. Though Georgia had lived often enough in lawless places, she found it difficult to adapt her mind to the idea that here, in England, a blue uniform might cover an enemy. The servant, Millie, had recognized the policeman as the regular one on the beat: yet there seemed little doubt now that he had invented the story of the man running away in order to find out whether Georgia had left the house that evening. It was quick work on the part of the E.B. What unnerved Georgia, though, was that it had been done with the full panoply of the law. She had a vision of E.B. stretching out its tentacles into all the places she used to believe most secure. Sir John had warned her at the start that the movement had a certain foothold in the police, the army, the Civil Service; but it had needed that polite young constable to bring it right home to her. From now on, she would not know who was friend, who was enemy.

Well, she had her job. She must stick to Chilton and "find out what his arrangements are." In Sir John's crisp, business-like tones, it had sounded like nothing more important than the plans, say, for a summer cruise. Yet on those plans history was now balanced. And what chance had she, supposing her alibi of yesterday night did not convince the E.B.? About as much chance as a bug under a steam-hammer. Only Georgia's remarkable buoyancy of temperament, the self-confidence that had carried her through so many difficult places, prevented her falling into despair during the next few days.

It was on the Saturday morning that the great news-story broke, overwhelming her own worries and activities as a beaver-dam might be overwhelmed by the tidal wave of an earthquake. The trap she had set to catch Chilton Canteloe, to identify him with the woman in the locket, seemed a niggling, irrelevant thing in the face of this enormous counter-stroke—no stronger than the wisps of flax that Samson burst with one heave of his muscles. Georgia opened her papers that morning, and their headlines smacked her across the eyes. The press had certainly let itself go.

"MILLIONAIRE PLANS MILLENNIUM," one paper shrieked.

"CANTELOE'S CURE," howled another antiphonally.

"CHILTON'S CHALLENGE," chimed a third.

Pouring herself another cup of coffee, Georgia lit a cigarette and read quickly through the various stories. They boiled down to this. Last night the millionaire had given a dinner to a number of prominent industrialists, bankers and scientists. The speech he made had evidently been issued to the press beforehand, for the papers carried it verbatim. It put forward a plan for the abolition of unemployment in Great Britain.

In brief, a network of co-operative enterprises was to be set up all over Britain, among which the unemployed were to be distributed. Each man should follow the trade to which he had been accustomed, while those who had not yet learnt a trade would for the present provide the unskilled labour. As far as possible, each co-operative should be self-sufficient: but the necessary goods which any one of them could not manufacture would be exchanged by a system of barter with commodities produced by some other co-operative. The scheme was on a heroic scale. Whole communities might be transplanted to places where they could work under the best conditions. On the other hand, it did not necessarily involve a depopulation of the derelict areas. "The desert," Chilton had quoted in his moving peroration, "shall blossom like a rose." There was coal and iron in the earth, there were fish in the sea. It was pernicious nonsense, Chilton declared, to say that the unemployed did not want work. All that you needed was a scheme by which the fish might get to the miners, the coal to the fishermen.

This co-operative scheme would not injure the normal trade of the country, he pointed out, for by it the unemployed would be transformed into one vast, self-contained unit, living by the exchange of its own commodities until such time as world economic conditions allowed them to be reabsorbed into the normal productive life of Great Britain. The scheme would apply not only to manual labour, but to unemployed architects, engineers, doctors, teachers, clerks—all of whom could find a place in the co-operative communities.

Chilton Canteloe emphasized that, by this means, all the derelict agricultural land could be brought into cultivation again, thus helping to diminish the danger of starvation in the event of war. Moreover, each co-operative would have its own deep-shelter against air-raids, and could send out "Defense Workers" to construct such shelters in the big towns. These two points, the latter especially, were given great prominence in the press accounts, for they concerned matters over which the public had been growing more and more restive during recent years.

Until the scheme was properly on its feet, it would be subsidized by a loan, in which Lord Canteloe was prepared to sink £1,000,000 himself. The interest would accrue from a certain percentage of the co-operative commodities which would be set aside and launched upon the home or foreign markets. As to this loan—and now Georgia began to see light—it should be a government loan: but, if the government was unwilling to adopt the scheme, Chilton offered to run it himself. He already had the support of a number of influential persons who were present there tonight. This was no Utopian plan, he concluded, no lunatic philanthropy, but a scheme which had been worked out by experts and approved by hard-headed business men. Great ills demanded heroic remedies. No man's personal interests or prejudices should be allowed to outweigh the terrible fact that two million of our countrymen were being condemned to a living death.

Georgia turned to the leading articles. They were for the most part cautious and noncommittal. A scheme backed by such weight of authority could not be dismissed with a little editorial persiflage. At the same time, it was evident that Chilton's speech had not been given to the papers in time for their experts to make a thorough examination before the paper went to press. His scheme, therefore, had a day's start to impress public opinion: it was a jump ahead of any expert criticism: and a day's start, Georgia knew, will work wonders. The timing of Chilton's stroke roused her to unwilling admiration. Political genius is often a matter of perfect timing, and she realized, as never before, what Sir John and herself and all the rest of them were up against. Her musings were interrupted by the arrival of Alison Grove, looking like a butterfly dishevelled by an unseasonable gale.

"Well, the lid's off now, my dear," she said. "I don't believe even John Strangeways knew this was going to break."

"Do you think Chilton is at all sincere over it? It can't just be a gigantic piece of spoof. His backers——"

"The people backing the scheme are mainly high-ups in the E.B., you can bet your pants on it, my girl. This scheme only need be coherent enough to hold water for a few weeks, while it's making its impact on public opinion. The man in the street doesn't give two damns for expert verdicts. Suppose the present government refuses to consider the scheme, shows up all its weak points: the man in the street won't bother about that, he'll say to himself, 'Here at last is someone making constructive proposals on the three subjects that've been most on my mind—the unemployed, food in war-time, real security from air-raids. And, as usual, the government turns it down. To hell with governments! Why can't we have Chillie running the country?' "

"Yes, that's true. He's certainly got wonderful tactical skill. Reading his speech, I found a sort of disillusionment and discontent with parliamentary government even creeping over myself. It's very skilful, the way he injects a note of scepticism, a good-humoured but weary contempt for the muddle parliament has made of everything."

"Believe me, if there was any doubt before, there's none now. He's the most popular man in Britain today. You can't imagine the sensation this has made in Fleet Street. And all the way along here I kept being bumped into by people with their eyes glued to their newspapers. If ever the E.B. are allowed to make their coup, there's not going to be much difficulty in putting over their dictator now."

"Yes. He'll have the better part of the two million unemployed at his back, for one thing. And there's nothing Nazi-ish about it to arouse their suspicions, either. No talk of labour camps and so on."

"That's his genius. The leopard that changed his spots. It doesn't look like Fascism: it doesn't sound like Fascism: it doesn't smell like Fascism. But—" Alison shrugged her shoulders.

"It's odd, his coming out into the open like this so soon after I began to get proof that he's the man behind the E.B."

"Don't flatter yourself, my dear. Spoof or no spoof, his scheme has taken longer to work out than that. You're just a nice little woman to him. Or perhaps a nasty little nuisance. Depends how much he's found out. Blast Lady Rissington and her mirror!"

"It makes me feel like Mickey Mouse trying to ride a whale."

"Even a whale's got its weak spot. It's your job now to find it."

Alison crossed her pretty legs, and went on, "Yes, Chillie's got the politicians in a cleft stick. The present government daren't ignore his scheme since he's threatened to run it himself if they do, and that puts them in a false position. The Opposition can't use it as a stick to beat the government with, because—although there's a certain flavour of Socialism about it—it's been put forward by a group of capitalists. He's taken the wind out of everyone's sails."

Georgia walked over to the window, stared out unseeing at the opposite houses, the trees in the square now limp and dusty after the summer months. It was a familiar scene, but today the ordinariness of it did not comfort her. She thought of Nigel, who had gone to live with a friend at Oxford: they had lived here together and had been happy, but now she felt like an exile for whom the unreality of the present clouds even the past happiness. Shaken by a spasm of intolerable longing, she turned away. On with the motley, she thought: on with the make-believe. It can't last for ever. Either they'll find me out, and Hargreaves Steele's filthy bacilli will do the rest; or else we'll beat them, and I can become an ordinary person again. Oh, Nigel, if only we could have been doing this *together!*

Chapter 11

The Episode of the Clock-Golf Course

Georgia's first sight of Chilton Ashwell was on an August evening. She had travelled up to the Midlands by train. At the main-line station she was met by a chauffeur, who tucked her solicitously into the Rolls-Royce and drove fast through the mining district from which a part of Lord Canteloe's wealth was derived. They were model villages, having sprung up out of a new coal-field during the last twenty years, the groups of red-brick houses arranged in crescents, their gardens blazing with flowers. There was nothing here to remind one of all that lay beneath, except the black-faced miners, tin-helmeted, their cans slung over their shoulders, bicycling home from the day shift, and the pervasive, indescribable tang which burning slag-heaps left in the air.

After a drive of eight miles, the car turned off through the park gates and whirred up an avenue of beeches that rose, smooth and metallic like organ pipes, into the evening sky. An occasional pheasant, alarmed by their approach, rocketed screeching away. Rabbits lolloped leisurely across the drive in front of them. Then the drive curved, the screen of trees and bracken fell away a little, and Georgia saw the west front of Chilton Ashwell, all its windows glowing like opals in the late sun. The grey, Palladian façade looked infinitely peaceful: its elegance had an ethereal quality, as though this house still lay in the dreaming mind of its creator, and might vanish into thin air at a touch. On the lake swans sailed with their dreamlike motion, arched their necks superbly. The stone-balustraded terrace, the formal gardens had the swept air of a place from which men have long since departed, where only history remains. You could not imagine this house in any other setting, or that green parkland opening to reveal any other house.

Yes, thought Georgia, Chilton Ashwell is everything he claimed for it. But I must not let myself be lulled into oblivion by all this. He shan't try his stately-homes-of-England stuff on me. Walking up the broad, shallow steps, already half under the spell of this house, she forced herself to remember that here, in the heart of England, England's ruin was being planned.

She was shown into a high-ceilinged, homely room, where a number of the party were congregated. Chilton Canteloe's face lighted up when she appeared. In flannels, his hair rumpled, he looked more boyish than ever: he strode across the room with his stooping, bear-like gait, and took both her hands for a moment.

"How nice to see you. And you got here quite safely? Do you want some tea?"

"No, thanks. I've had it. I do think your house is perfect." Georgia glanced round, a little bemused by all these conflicting sensations. Most of the men, she noticed, were in flannels. "Have you all been morris-dancing?" she asked.

Chilton threw back his head, and roared with laughter. "Morris-dancing! What a tortuous mind you have! Never content with the obvious. We've been playing cricket."

"It's all one to Georgia," said a familiar voice. "She doesn't know the difference."

"Peter! I never knew you'd be here. Have they thrown you out of your county side?"

"We've no fixture today. So Lord Canteloe asked me to play for his team against one of the local pits. Eh, they're terrors, your miners. Ah've been boomped all over," said Peter Braithwaite, throwing a Nottingham twang into his voice.

"We don't dope our wicket here," said Chilton grinning. "Shows you up properly, Peter, my lad, when you've got to play on a piece of honest turf."

The friendly banter was so English, Georgia thought bitterly: like the whole atmosphere of Chilton Ashwell which, in spite of its owner's millions, achieved that paradoxical English blend of the idyllic and the cosy. At dinner, too, when they were talking about Chilton's plan for the unemployed, and Georgia—acting her part—remarked that perhaps his recent travels in Germany and Italy had helped him to formulate it, Chilton replied passionately that he hoped we should never model ourselves on continental methods, the English spirit was a thing apart and must always create its own forms.

Studying his magnetic, brown, gold-flecked eyes, which could turn so easily from playfulness to an almost tigerish fury of concentration, Georgia was inclined to think he really meant it. His belief in himself was so implicit that he could never doubt, at the moment, the truth of his own words. He was a self-deceiver on the heroic scale, and of that stuff dictators are made. If a man is only vulnerable at the point where his self-confidence leaves off, Georgia asked herself, where is Chilton's weak spot?

Tonight more than ever she realized how invulnerable he was. Among the guests there were two women at least whose beauty was worth a king's ransom—the dazzling, blonde, patrician-featured Lady Rissington, and Mrs. Mainwaring with her loveliness that glowed in the candle-lit room like a ruby or a smouldering coal. It was plain that he had only to lift a finger and they would follow him anywhere. Yet his manner towards them was affectionate, teasing, whimsical, without either the puritan's stiff reserve or the libertine's aggressiveness; they might have been his kid sisters just out of the schoolroom: and, oh my, don't they know it, Georgia thought with secret amusement, watching their subtle or undisguised efforts to capture his attention.

She was the more surprised when after dinner they began dancing to the radio gramophone and Chilton sought her out first, leaving the two professional charmers to bite their thumbs together. He danced perfectly, absorbed in the steps, the usual clumsiness of his gait altogether gone. I am now not merely in the lion's den, but in his very jaws, Georgia said to herself: it gave her a feeling of temerity and faint astonishment. Well, he's only a man, after all. He feels like a man, his fingers are warm on my back, so snap out of it, my girl.

When their dance was over, he took her out onto the terrace. The park was stretched before them, its smooth contours seeming to stir in the universal rhythm of sleep. Below, the lake glimmered, and riding swans were like drowned ghosts of moonlight. The music throbbed out again behind them.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" asked Georgia, turning to meet his eyes.

"How am I looking at you?"

"As if I was a new kind of equation your teacher had chalked up on the blackboard."

"Perhaps you are, Georgia. I can't quite place you."

"Do you always have to place people?"

"When they might be dangerous to me—yes."

Georgia's voice was cool, interested, not in the least betraying how his words had shaken her. "How could I be dangerous to you?"

"If you don't know that, nobody does."

A silence fell, broken by the flurried squawk of a moorhen among the reeds below. There was something formidable about Chilton's silence, his refusal to press her at all. She felt his enigmatic power circled about her, mingling with the spell of house and moonlit park.

"This is a very odd conversation, considering we've only met once before," she said at last.

"We're neither of us ordinary people," he replied indifferently. "Do you suppose we should talk about the weather?"

"It's a safe subject, especially when you're with a *dangerous* person." She underlined the word. Two could play at the game of cryptic remarks.

"I don't play for safety. Nor do you, judging by accounts."

"There's not much risk for a traveller today. Only dirt and fatigue. I never minded them much."

"Travelling. Oh, yes," said Chilton politely. He linked his hands behind his neck. "But were we talking about travel?"

Georgia made no reply. Her silence stood up to him like an ice barrier. His voice deepened. "I believe you've no idea what an electrifying creature you are. You make the Mainwarings and Rissingtons of this world look like dumb celluloid close-ups. A woman like you could——"

He broke off, put his hand under her elbow and took her back into the house. No, thought Georgia, it's absurd. Fantastically absurd. Yet perhaps this is the way to do it—the only way I could do it. It must be the resistance in me that attracts him: he's so used to women crumpling up at his feet: he senses this resistance; but how far does he suspect its real cause? Did he mean I was dangerous to the man, or to the future dictator?

She had no opportunity that night for talking to Peter Braithwaite alone. Next morning, though, when Chilton was in conference with his secretary and his agent, Peter asked her to have a round of clock-golf with him.

"I can't play clock-golf," she said.

"That's all right. I play it like a master. You'd be surprised."

The lawn lay between waist-high hedges of beech. At the far end stood a miniature marble temple, built by some 18th century Canteloe who liked to admire his panorama from a classical vantage-point, abandoned now to spiders and golf-clubs.

"A good place to talk," said Peter cheerfully. "You can see any one approaching, quite a long way off. And one can always hide behind that marble oddment if they start shooting."

"Are you expecting to get shot? I thought you'd come here to play cricket!"

"Oh, I'm doing a bit of that on the side. Alison told me you'd begun to play the big fish."

"Were you surprised?"

"After the things I've come across these last months, I'd not have been surprised to hear that Canteloe was the Grand Lama of Tibet in disguise," said Peter, hitting his ball negligently over the hillocky turf to the lip of the hole. Georgia followed suit, with pronounced ill-success.

"I wish there weren't all these horrid little bumps in the grass," she complained. "It's not fair."

"As a matter of fact, clock-golf is usually played on a level surface, not a sort of championship golf green like this. I suppose Canteloe wanted to make it more difficult. He fancies himself as a games-player. A gardener told me that his Lordship laid this out himself not long ago. Beats me how he gets time for all this, what with planning for the unemployed, organizing a revolution and being groomed for Britain's dictator."

"Don't stop playing, Peter, and be careful what you say. There's someone watching us out of a window in the east wing, with field-glasses."

"Field-glasses? What does he think we are? A couple of long-tailed tits?"

"There's such a thing as lip-reading, Peter. Keep your back to the house if you're going to throw off any more slander about our host."

They played the remaining holes. The young cricketer was quite accustomed to being watched by people with field-glasses: he kept running his ball up to the pin, his slender wrists moving neatly, lazily.

"It's a very lopsided sort of clock, isn't it?" said Georgia. The little numbered discs from which they played did not, as usual in this game, form a circle, but were dotted irregularly about the lawn.

"Canteloe is a very lopsided sort of man," Peter replied.

After they had finished the game and Georgia had declined another, they went to sit in the marble summerhouse. Two caryatids, blank-eyed, supported the door. You could see Chilton Ashwell and its rolling parkland all laid out below, scorching now in the summer heat. A herd of deer, motionless and painted as wooden toys, was congregated among the shadowing oaks away to their left.

"Canteloe seems to have taken a fancy to you," said Peter at last.

"I can't quite make out whether he's a bit suspicious of me, or whether it's—well, natural interest. The latter, let's hope. It might come in very useful."

"Don't, Georgia," the cricketer exclaimed with unusual intensity. "You mustn't let it come to that. It didn't matter so much with me. I'm just a chap who can hit a cricketball hard. But you're different. You're really worth something."

"My dear Peter, what are you——"

"I can't get Rosa Alvarez out of my head." He shivered in the dry, lizard-like chill of the summerhouse. "It was bad enough leading her up the garden path. Well, she asked for it, I suppose. She was a stupid, greedy, frightened woman, if you like, and I was the young hero in a Secret Service play, risking worse than death for his country's sake. All right. Let it go. But I killed that woman. I'm responsible for whatever filthy thing it was that Alvarez and the E.B. did to her. Yes, I know, all in a good cause. But a good cause doesn't make a dirty trick clean. Sounds silly, but I feel as if I'll have to expiate Rosa's death somehow."

"I do understand, Peter," said Georgia gently. "But you can't keep the rules when you're fighting anything as big and unscrupulous as the E.B. You've got to set your teeth and plunge into the muck."

"I reckon there are limits. I wouldn't like to see you laying for Canteloe—well, in that way. It'd save a lot of trouble if I shot him straight off." He chuckled grimly, half aware of his own naïveté. Georgia had forgotten how dizzily his temperament could swing him from hilarity into the deepest gloom. That was the damnable thing about this business—you lost track of your friends, you got calloused and insensitive to everything but the enemy's movements, like fighters in a guerilla war.

"We'll have to get hold of his plans before we shoot Canteloe," she said.

"Well, here he is, coming along with that cod-faced secretary of his. You'd better ask him for them."

They giggled at each other, keyed up to action again, back in a brittle polished world of make-believe that shuddered like thin ice under their feet.

"Very well, David, you'll see to that, then?" said Canteloe. The secretary turned back to the house, his black morning-suit and bald, bland head looking absurdly incongruous amid these sylvan surroundings.

"And what are you two conspiring about?"

"Peter's just given me a frightful licking. He's a master at clock-golf. I'd back him against Henry Cotton."

A faint shadow of petulance appeared on Chilton Canteloe's face. He gazed speculatively at Peter for a moment, then challenged him to a game. Perched on the windowsill of the marble summerhouse, Georgia watched them. They both played with almost uncanny skill: but, whereas Peter struck the ball nonchalantly and did not seem to mind whether he won or lost, Chilton was all rigid, furious concentration. The little white balls ran, dipped, curled over the undulating turf: after the first time round, the opponents were all square: they decided to play another twelve holes. Georgia found herself desperately willing Peter to win. It was as if great issues hung on the result. Chilton obtained a lead of two holes; but Peter, pulling out a flash of extraordinary brilliance, holed out in one twice running and pegged him back: then he started to go ahead.

Chilton cracked. He couldn't do anything right: his ball shot far past the mark or only crawled half-way towards it. In a moment, Georgia realized he wasn't trying—or rather, that he was deliberately playing badly so that victory would leave a nasty taste in his opponent's mouth. It was incredible. This man, who already controlled so many lives and might in a few months' time be controlling the destinies of an empire, was sulking like a peevish schoolboy over a footling little game. He couldn't bear to be beaten at anything. His morale would crack up under pressure. It seemed of immense significance to Georgia: never again would she think of Chilton Canteloe and the E.B. as invulnerable, invincible: she would no longer be fighting a power huge and resistless as Fate —only a man who lost his temper at clock-golf.

It did not occur to her at the time that her presence exacerbated Chilton's defeat. She was thinking, rather, how great his egotism must be to permit him thus to sulk in public. A less self-confident man would have made some attempt to conceal his pique.

When the game was over, Chilton gave her a wry, ugly smile, and without a word went abruptly off into the summerhouse.

"He doesn't like losing, does he?" whispered Peter.

"Sh!"

Chilton Canteloe, having put his putter away, emerged again between the two caryatids. For a moment his Grecian face seemed inhuman as theirs. He surveyed the putting-green that lay mapped out beneath the summerhouse.

Lips curved in a remote smile, nostrils distended, legs planted apart, he looked in that instant, thought Georgia, like a general surveying a battlefield. Then his expression relaxed, he chatted to them good-humouredly for a few moments, and set off towards the house.

"Girlie's recovered her poise," said Peter, nodding at Chilton's retreating back. "Hey, Georgia, are you going off into a trance?"

Georgia was standing between the two caryatids, gazing over the clock-golf course as Chilton had done. What had brought that imperious, secret expression into Chilton's face? She stared at the green, and gradually its contours shaped themselves into something familiar.

"Peter, come up here," she called softly. He stood on the top step of the miniature temple beside her.

"When is a clock not a clock?" she asked.

"All right. You tell me."

"When it's a map. A nice, bumpy contour map. Peter, you're going to play some more golf. You need practice. Go round the course, playing two balls. Start at Number One mark, hit the balls up to the hole, then stroll after them. Only put one foot in front of the other, so I get the distances measured out in feet. If any one's watching from the house, they'll think you're just pottering about: your feet will be screened by those beech-hedges. Walk back from the pin to the first tee, then measure out the distance between that and Number Two mark—knocking the balls along in front of you. I'll do the counting: you concentrate on walking naturally. I want the number of feet between each successive tee, and between each tee and the pin. Take some cross measurements, too. That'll help, as I shall only be able to calculate the angles roughly."

"O.K. But what *is* all this about?"

"It may be a boss shot. But I have an idea that this green represents a map of England. The bumps and ridges—well, look, can't you see a suggestion of the Pennine Chain over there, and the Cotswolds, and the Chilterns? And, if I'm right, maybe the position of the hole and the twelve starting-marks with tell us something."

"Good Lord! But, look here, do you seriously suggest that Chilton would lay out a plan of the doings right beneath everyone's noses?"

"It sounds crazy. But he *is* a touch crazy. He's the kind that gets a kick out of tempting providence, reckless, a bit of an exhibitionist, too. We know that he laid out this green personally. Just now he surveyed it—well, like looking down on all the kingdoms of the world. He snapped out of his sulks right away. He was seeing things in perspective again. Can't you imagine him coming up here, brooding over it like a Napoleon, drawing inspiration from it—the map of England, and he's the man who's going to change it? And at the same time getting a sort of schoolboyish fun out of the idea that his plan, which the Secret Service is bursting itself to get a sniff of, is staring up out of this green with oh such an innocent expression on its face? Do get on with it," Georgia added irritably. "It's probably just another hunch of mine gone wrong, but get on with it!"

Watching him through the summerhouse window, she sketched out on paper a rough plan of the green and filled in the measurements as Peter paced them out. The insect-drone of a lawn-mower came over from the cricket-ground where this afternoon Peter would be facing the local talent. There were faint, spasmodic cries from the tennis-courts, and once or twice a peacock gave its outraged scream. The sounds wove themselves into a background for the tap of Peter's club, the stir of her own pencil on the paper. . . .

An hour later Georgia was sitting behind a locked door in her bedroom. The map of England lay open before her. First she must establish what spot on the map corresponded with the hole which lay in the centre of the putting-green. Why not Chilton Ashwell itself? She made some rough calculations, scaling her own plan till it fitted the map. A stab of misgiving struck her. Unless Chilton had planned out his green accurately to scale, she would get no further. Well, the E.B. paid great attention to detail, so perhaps their leader had done likewise. The question was—what did the numbered discs on the green represent? There are twelve of them. Wait a minute, the E.B. had divided up the country into six districts, with an organizer over each. Supposing the odd or the even six discs indicated district centres? She suspected that the Mayfield stables in Berkshire was such a one: and she knew there was an arms-dump beneath Major Keston's house in Devonshire. Breathing hard, Georgia calculated distance, plotted positions. She had three given points—Chilton Ashwell, Yarnold Farm, the Mayfields. Yes, the points on her plan which corresponded roughly to the two latter places were both even numbers. But they corresponded too roughly, that was the trouble. Number Six fell between twenty and thirty miles north of Yarnold Farm, for instance: the Mayfield point was too far north, also. It looked as if the whole thing would be a wash-out. Her plan must be far more accurate than this if it was to be of any use to Sir John.

Her first point of reference might be wrong, though. She was only assuming that the centre of the green indicated Chilton Ashwell. If her other two reference points were given their approximately correct position on the map, the central point would fall farther south, between twenty and thirty miles south—would fall, she muttered excitedly, as near as nothing slap on Nottingham. Nottingham, the centre of England! Yes, why not? Nothing could be more symbolic, or more likely. There was a huge armaments factory near Nottingham, for one thing.

Now she had these three points firmly fixed, it was possible to plot the others with fair hope of accuracy. The even numbers, she noticed, fell in country districts—Northumberland, Norfolk, Berkshire, Devonshire, Carmarthen, Cheshire. She had half expected the odd numbers to coincide with the great cities of England, but they fell at random and she was inclined to discount them. Thinking it over, she began to change her opinion that the even numbers denoted the bases of the six district organizations: some of these, at least, would surely be in big towns. Major Keston's house certainly was an arms dump. Why should not the other five be the same?—great reservoirs of arms which had gradually been filling during the last two years, dotted widely over the country in strategic positions, from which—when the time came—arms could be distributed to the centres of the rising.

Georgia locked her plan away, and sat back with a sigh. Half her work was now surely done. Even though her calculations could not indicate accurately the positions of the E.B. arms reservoir, they were near enough to enable Sir John to draw a cordon round these districts at the first sign of trouble. Unless the arms had already been distributed from them, the rising was as good as crippled.

Chapter 12

The Episode of the Nottingham Earthquake

Though Chilton pressed her to stay longer, and Peter hoped she would come over with some of the other guests to see him playing at Trent Bridge on the Wednesday, Georgia returned to London on Tuesday. She wanted to make sure that her plan would be conveyed safely to Sir John Strangeways. She believed, too, that her early departure would heighten Chilton's interest in her, for he was a man little accustomed to having his pressing invitations so firmly declined.

By leaving when she did, Georgia missed an incident that—in more ways than one—shook Nottingham. She was not there at Trent Bridge when the bails fell off the wickets though no ball had been bowled and no wind was blowing. If she had stayed, she might not have lost a friend, but equally she might well have lost all chance of penetrating deeper into the warped and complex mind of Chilton Canteloe.

On Tuesday morning after Georgia had gone, Peter Braithwaite was sitting rather disconsolately on the terrace. He felt out of place here, and a little bored. He tried to fix his mind on tomorrow's match. Trent Bridge was not one of his lucky grounds. He must not start cutting those fast out-swingers of Joe Marston's this time till he'd got properly set—Joe knew his little weakness a sight too well. Cricket. There'd be no more cricket if the E.B. succeeded; they'd all be too busy forming fours and yapping "Heil, Canteloe" at each other. Well, give him his due, Chilton probably wouldn't stop the cricket. But to be fooling about with bat and ball when this hellish infernal machine was ticking away in England's heart—that got you down.

Rosa Alvarez got you down too. When Georgia was about, it didn't seem so bad: she put life into you, made you feel right on top of your game, made you feel the game was worth a candle. Playing up to Rosa had seemed a good game too, at the time. But now you could only remember that flushed, silly, terrified face—the way you'd handed her back to the executioners without a murmur, half glad to be shut of her, kidding yourself that you'd just done your duty and England Expects and all that ballyhoo. Well, get on with it, then: do something to justify your place in the team: why not have a snoop round in Chilton's study, for a start? Jerusalem! What a hope!

For all that, Peter got to his feet and moved silently along the terrace to where the French windows of the study opened out on the summer day. Though he had worked long enough for Sir John, off and on, he could never quite rid himself of the feeling that he was in the middle of one of those spy dramas he had acted in several times himself, where red lights flash over doors and hands appear out of panelling and papers marked "Secret" in red ink are strewn about in full view of the audience.

As he approached the study windows, a telephone bell rang inside. He stood still, gazing out across the park, listening hard. He was supposed to be playing tennis with the other guests, so Chilton would not expect any one to be here. Presently he heard the voice of David Renton, Canteloe's secretary, saying:

"From Mr. Blackham. He's sending Goltz up, sir. He'll be passing through at 4.15. Do you wish to speak to Mr. Blackham?"

"No. Just leave the address for Goltz. He knows where to find it, presumably?"

"Quite."

There was the slight ting of a receiver laid down on its rest. Canteloe began dictating a business letter to his secretary. Peter found it all very above board and boring. He'd have to find his way into the study some other time: those two were evidently in for a long session.

He walked down to the tennis-court, and stood watching the players. For such an indolent-looking houri, that Mainwaring girl wields a ferocious racket, he thought. Seeking to retrieve a hard shot down the side line, Mrs. Mainwaring slashed under the ball and hit it out of the court into a shrubbery. Peter hurried to retrieve it.

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Braithwaite," she said, giving him a lustrous glance. "You know where to find it? In that laurel bush, I think."

Peter tossed the ball over into the court. There was something peeping out at the back of his mind. "You know where to find it." When had somebody said that before? Of course. Chilton. Leave the address for Goltz, he knows where to find it, presumably. Well now, that was surely a little peculiar. If this Mr. Goltz was "passing at 4.15"—passing through what? the village? in a car? by train?—why couldn't someone simply tell him the address? "Knows where to find it" almost suggested that the address was hidden in some way. A curious method of doing business.

The young cricketer's mood of depression cleared up like an April sky, replaced by that tingling in the veins, that sense of buoyancy and clear-headedness which for him always preluded a big innings. He decided to keep a watchful eye on David Renton. If there was anything shady about Goltz, he would not be coming to the house, for it was part of Chilton's policy never to give E.B. agents any reason for identifying him with the movement. The secretary would have to "leave the address for Goltz" further afield.

Peter must allow the secretary to lead him to Goltz, then he must follow Goltz. He packed his bag, put it in his two-seater, and at lunch announced that he would be leaving Chilton Ashwell in the afternoon; he had to join up with his team at Nottingham, in readiness for tomorrow's match.

"Can I give you a lift into the village?" he asked David Renton, who had said that he would be going in to fetch a parcel from Ashwell station.

"No thanks. I haven't time to walk back, so I'd better take one of our own cars."

Shortly after 3 p.m. the secretary went off. Peter got into his own car and followed at a respectable distance for the three miles into the village. When they reached the first houses of Ashwell, he closed up a bit. Lucky this *is* the road to Nottingham, he thought: it's my lucky day. His quarry did not, as he had half expected, stop at the post-office, but went straight through the long village street and, just shore of the railway bridge that spanned the road, turned sharp right, making up the station approach.

Peter's mind worked in a flash. He had planned to see where David Renton stopped, let him depart again, then inquire himself whether there was a message for Mr. Goltz. His natural modesty had blinded him to the fact that Peter Braithwaite would be recognized anywhere in this cricket-loving county and could never pass himself off as Goltz. He realized it now, however; in the hundred yards that separated him from Renton's car, he altered his plans. Sweeping past the end of the station approach, he went under the bridge and turned right, up towards the goods yard. He could see a string of empty coal-trucks in the siding; they would screen his car from Renton's eyes. He drove up quietly, got out, stood under the lee of a coal-truck to light a cigarette.

The little branch-line station, its name picked out in stones amid a pattern of bright flowers—the station-master's pride—dozed under the afternoon sunlight. There was a smell of creosote from the sleepers. A voice from the opposite platform carried lazily through the air.

"That's raight, Mr. Renton. I put it here, ready for you. Joost saign this invoice. Can y' manage?"

Renton and a porter went together into the waiting-room.

"I hear you've 'ad yoong Braithwaite up at Chilton Ashwell. A nice bat, he is. I fancy Joe Marston'll have him tomorrow, though. He never could play Joe. They're a bit soft, these Soothern chaps."

Still talking, the porter emerged from the waiting-room. He was followed in a minute by David Renton, who carried his parcel under an immaculate, black-sleeved arm. Next moment, Peter heard the engine of Renton's car start up and saw it move decorously down the decline into the village. He leapt into his own, and followed Renton again. The secretary did not stop anywhere in Ashwell, so Peter could reasonably assume that the message must have been left at the station.

Mr. Goltz was not due till 4.15. That gave Peter rather less than half-an-hour's grace. He drove his car into a garage, took out his bag, and walked up to the station. As far as he could tell, Renton had stopped nowhere except for that minute he had been alone in the waiting-room. But how the blazes did you leave an address in a waiting-room? Peter discovered soon enough the answer to that. The cricket-enthusiast porter had retired to some sanctum of his own, and Peter had a clear run in to the stuffy, white-washed room whence Renton had taken his parcel.

It was undeniably, almost aggressively, empty. There was nothing but dust on the long table and the benches: in the fireplace there was nothing but cigarette-ends and orange-peel. Perhaps Renton had given the porter the address, to be passed on to this Goltz. No, the very essence of all the E.B. tactics was that nothing should be done which might give any one—even their own agents—a line on Chilton Canteloe. Discouraged, Peter moved over to the far wall of the waiting-room. "Well, I'll be—!" he exclaimed.

That white-washed wall was the answer. The address was written there in pencil. It was one of the two or three dozen names and addresses scrawled up there, together with inscriptions of a less reputable nature, by the summer tourists who alighted at this station for a day's outing among the bracken and swarming flies of Sherwood Forest. Peter could not help laughing at his own discomfiture. He might as well be looking for one particular lump of coal in Newcastle. No doubt Goltz had been told exactly where to find his address on the wall. Well, he would certainly have to wait for Goltz now.

He filled in the time by disguising his appearance a bit, for he did not want to be recognized here by the porter or any chance traveller. Peter always carried a few theatrical properties in his bag: when rain washed out play, he would amuse the teams with his deft little character-sketches. He gave himself pince-nez, a drooping, wispy moustache, and brushed his hair out to fall lankly over his right temple. He looked like a professor of chemistry in a provincial university, or a melancholy but quite prosperous grocer. Thus disguised, he bought a first-class ticket to Nottingham and returned to the waiting-room.

A long mineral train clanked past on the up line, the trucks jolting and clashing as the train gathered speed down the bank. Then there was no sound but the clucking of the station-master's hens from across the line. At last the wires under the platform's edge whirred, and a distant rumble followed. The 4.15 was due. Peter stood up, opened his bag, and dropped one or two articles on the floor.

When the man in the green pork-pie hat entered the waiting-room, he saw a fussy, disconsolate figure stuffing a pair of pyjamas into a bag. The man hesitated a moment. He had not expected to find any one here. He looked around quickly, walked over to the communicating door of the ladies' waiting-room, glanced at something written on the wall level with its handle.

"This is the gentleman's?" he asked the other traveller, a faint guttural note in his voice.

"The gentleman's? Oh, I see. Oh, no. That's along the platform."

The man hurried out. Peter straightened, studied the place on the wall where Goltz's eyes had rested. Yes, a name and address. "Sam Silver, 420 Easthwaite Street, Nottingham."

Peter went on to the platform, peered short-sightedly up and down. The porter was fetching a crate out of the goods van at the top of the train. The man in the pork-pie hat marched back along the platform.

"Pardon," said Peter timidly. "This *is* the Nottingham train?"

The man nodded brusquely, got back into his first-class carriage. Peter followed him in, tripping awkwardly over his bag.

"Very inconvenient, these local trains," said Peter. "No—er, I mean, no conveniences."

The man stared at him with undisguised contempt. "The English trains! Ach!" Then he pointedly settled down behind his newspaper. He was a thick-set man, about Peter's own height, with a clipped, stubbly moustache which did not mitigate the hairless impression that is given by a Prussian head. Peter, glancing at him, altered his plans. He had only intended to follow Goltz, then communicate the Nottingham address to Sir John. But why shouldn't he become Goltz, just for today? There was time to play Goltz today and beat the Notts men tomorrow. Here at last might be the opening he was looking for.

He began a flow of dreary small-talk, which Goltz after a while could no more ignore than a man can ignore the dripping of water on his forehead. Peter studied his tones of voice, the abrupt, hacking gestures he made with his hands. Whoever was expecting Goltz at the other end might conceivably have met him before; though the water-tight-compartment organization of the E.B. made this improbable.

Fortunately, Peter had travelled on this line before. He remembered that, after Bulthorpe station, the train climbed a steep incline with a wild heath at the foot of its embankment. Five minutes before they reached Bulthorpe, he got up to look at the map on Goltz's side of the compartment. Turning to sit down, he tripped over the man's feet.

"Oh, I say, I'm awfully sorry," he said, leaning apologetically towards Goltz. The next instant he had let fly a blow which caught the man on the point and knocked him cold. Peter tied Goltz's feet and hands with the straps from the man's own suitcase: he whipped out some adhesive plaster and strapped it over his mouth: he emptied Goltz's pockets. Then, as the train slowed down into Bulthorpe, he pushed the senseless body under the seat.

Let's hope nobody tries to get in here, he thought. Pretty safe. First-class compartments are not much in demand on this line. He stood in the window, scowling, prepared to repel boarders, but there were no passengers on the platform. The train started off again, clattered round a curve, approached the stiff incline of Bulthorpe bank. Peter dragged out Goltz's body, now beginning to twitch and stir a little. He wedged open the door, and tipped the body out: its fall should be concealed by the steep wall of the embankment down which it was rolling. Well, that takes care of him for a bit, he'll roll down into the heath and stay there till we send someone to pick him up.

Peter stood by the mirror, clipping his moustache till it resembled Goltz's. With Goltz's pork-pie hat, that would serve for the present. He began to examine the articles he had taken from the man's pockets. Not much information could be gleaned from them, but, such as it was, it was invaluable. Inside his watch an E.B. disk was pasted. His diary had an entry for tomorrow, "Nottingham, 8.30." So Goltz was not due at Sam Silver's till tomorrow morning. Well, that would give Peter more time; unfortunately, it would also leave more time for the real Goltz to be discovered.

Alighting at Nottingham, he went into the hairdresser's at the station hotel, and had his hair clipped short. Then he sought out a smaller hotel, registered there as H. Goltz, and settled down to examine Goltz's suitcase in the privacy of his bedroom. It contained, among other things, some overalls, a suit of dark-grey worsted, and some blue-prints which, not being an engineer, he could make head nor tail of. He remembered his car, left at the garage in Ashwell. When Goltz returned to the fold, he would have no possible reason to connect the droopy-moustached individual, who had attacked him in the train, with Peter Braithwaite, the cricketer. But it would be as well to leave no loose ends lying about. Peter went along to the hotel where his own team were staying, and sent up a message to Frank Haskings, the wicket-keeper, a close friend of his. He had removed his moustache in a public lavatory on the way, but he came in for some chaffing at Frank's hands about the convict cut of his hair.

"Frank, I had to leave my car in Ashwell. Will you borrow one and drive me over to fetch it? And please keep all this to yourself. I'm—well, for one thing I shan't be sleeping here tonight."

"Oh, a dame? Well, that's your business. Did she tell you to get your hair cut, too?"

Frank's entirely gratuitous inference gave him another idea. When they reached the Ashwell garage, he took its proprietor aside and fiddled suggestively with a one-pound note.

"Look here, if any one comes snooping round, you might forget the fact that my car was left in here this afternoon. Fact is—well, there's a lady in the case, and I don't want——"

"That's all right, Mr. Braithwaite. You drove in this afternoon for a minor repair, and you was off again in ten minutes' time. How'll that do? Hope you gets a century tomorrow. I'm an old Middlesex supporter myself, see?"

That's that end stopped, thought Peter, driving his car back to Nottingham. The garage is at the extreme end of the village, and it's fifty to one nobody could have noticed me putting the car in or taking it out.

He garaged at Nottingham, resumed his disguise, and returned to his hotel. There, he wrote a brief report of today's events which would go to Sir John Strangeways through the usual channels. He also wrote a note to Frank Haskings, telling him to put the police on to Sam Silver, of 420 Easthwaite Street, urgently. He would hand this note to the hall-porter when he went out tomorrow morning, asking him to have it delivered at Trent Bridge ground if he himself had not returned by eleven o'clock.

That was all he could do by way of precautions. The rest must be left to luck and his own resource. He was taking a grave risk, he knew. But he was tired of playing for keeps with the E.B. The same blend of audacity and impatience that, on the cricket field, compelled him sometimes to take a dip at a bowler who was pegging him down, in the hope of knocking him off his length, possessed him now. They might get his wicket. Well, let them. It was better than pottering about . . .

Easthwaite Street, a long, squalid thoroughfare, lay under the shadow of Nottingham Castle and its towering rock. Just before eight-thirty next morning Peter was standing outside Number 420. *"S. Silver, Furniture Dealer"* was the legend over the shop-front. Peter marched in, with the jerky, military stride of Mr. Goltz. A small man wearing a baize apron and a gap-toothed smile appeared from behind a clutter of furniture like a rabbit out of a burrow. I hope to God there are no passwords or anything, prayed Peter. He clicked his heels and said:

"Mr. Silver?"

"That's me. What can I do for you, sir? Looking for a nice bedroom suite perhaps?"

"My name's Goltz. You are expecting me," Peter rapped out. The silence that followed took him by the throat like a fog. The little man was staring at him dubiously, scratching the thinning hair on top of his skull. Was that crack about the bedroom suite a password? Did he have to reply, "No, I want a couple of mahogany sideboards," for instance? Staring back at the man with all the Prussian insolence he could assume, Peter took out Goltz's watch.

"It is eight-thirty," he said. "We must get to business." He allowed the watch-cover to flip open, exposing the E.B. disk on its back. That brought Sam Silver into camp all right. Bidding Peter follow him, he retired towards the back of the shop, led the way down a ladder into a basement stacked with second-hand furniture, opened the door of a large wardrobe that stood against the wall, and stepped inside it. It was done so quickly that Peter had scarcely time to savour the oddity of the proceedings. Does the local E.B. hold its meetings inside a wardrobe? he asked himself, feeling all the bewildered interest of Alice in her Wonderland.

This wardrobe was a unique one: it had no back. Or rather, its back was a door in the wall—a door that led into a dark, low passage, along which Peter now followed the beam of Mr. Silver's torch. He remembered that the ground beneath Nottingham was honeycombed with these passages, burrowed out of the sandstone by prehistoric hands. He remembered, too, the use to which the Cagoulards had meant to put the underground warrens of Paris. It would be wise now to turn back. He could easily get away now, and he had learnt the secret of the furniture shop. But that strange mixture of happy-go-lucky daring and deep fatalism, which made up Peter Braithwaite's character, led him on. Another hundred yards, crouching along the low-roofed passage, moving always perceptibly downhill, and they arrived in an immense chamber brilliantly lit with electricity which must be generated on the spot. Two men were working at a metal lathe. A third, at the far end of the chamber—Peter did not need any scientific knowledge to be sure of it—was filling bombs. The underground room was both a munitions factory and an arsenal.

"Here's Mr. Goltz, boys," said Sam Silver, and ducked back again, more rabbit-like than ever, into the warren.

The men looked up from their work. The place grew instantly silent. Peter could hear nothing but the faint hum of a dynamo from beyond the opening at the other end of the room. One of the men, a big, greasy-faced fellow with a nervous tic that kept fluttering beneath his left eye, came up to Peter and put out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Goltz. My name's Tooley. We've been at sixes and sevens here since Mr. Haines went sick. Now we can get going again."

Peter felt a stab of apprehension. Goltz had been sent to supervise the munitions-making. How much longer could he sustain the part of Goltz now? He clicked his heels, ignored Tooley's hand, barked out harshly,

"So. Goot. Above here is what?"

"You needn't worry. We're too far down for any danger of interference." The man jerked his thumb at the roof. "Up above's a piece of waste land, and a derelict factory. Now, if you'll step this way, sir. This cutter—Harry's spoilt two jobs on it already. Seems it's got out of alignment."

Peter bent studiously over the machine. It might have been the Koran for all he knew about it. Well, nothing like taking the offensive.

"So," he said. "This machine has been mishandled. I must return to my hotel and fetch some tools."

"Mr. Haines's kit is here, sir. You were to use them."

Tooley led him over to a bench littered with drawings, scribbled formulae, and instruments. Peter glanced at them in dismay. He must get out. At any moment his ignorance would be betrayed. He made a hacking gesture with his hand, exclaimed gutturally:

"Ach, these are no goot! We need a—how do you say it?—verbinderungschaft?" And let's hope none of them know any more German than I do, he thought, for I don't know a word of it. He stalked angrily away, feeling three pairs of eyes boring like cold steel into his back. He was five feet away from the opening of the passage when Sam Silver appeared again. Something in his rabbity face told Peter that all was up with him. He made a dash for the passage, hurling the little man aside. But it was too late. The passage was blocked—blocked by the stocky body of the real Mr. Goltz.

It was a good fight while it lasted, but five to one is too great odds, even against a man who knows that defeat means death. They knelt on him, kneeing him into the floor. Breathing hard, Mr. Goltz bent down and brutally tore off Peter's moustache. The jerk of pain sickened him.

"You see, gentlemen?" said Goltz.

"By God! A bloody spy!"

Then they had him tied up, spreadeagled on one of the work-benches. The faces round him gave no hope. It was their lives or his. The close-set eyes showed all the viciousness of frightened men who can revenge their own fear on another's body.

"Who are you? Who sent you here? If you tell us everything, we shall make things a little easier for you," said Goltz.

"Oh, take a jump at yourself."

"So." It was like an echo of his own voice. Yes, thought Peter, with a flicker of pride even in this extremity, I got his intonation just right.

Tooley said, "Put the bleeder's fingers in that vice. He'll talk."

Pain ground into him, furrowing his flesh like grapnels. After a while he fainted. They waited till he came round, and then started again. He lost all track of time. There was nothing in the world left for him but this agony, and his determination not to speak. He knew that the pain must win in the end. Later—hours or minutes later—there was a lull. Words were running blindly in Peter's head, running, flickering to and fro behind a mist. He strove to capture them, they would help him to resist a little longer. Painfully he pieced the lines together out of his shattered consciousness—

. . . For the field is full of shades as I near the shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,
And I look through my tears on a soundless-clapping host
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro,
to and fro,
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!

"Will you talk now, damn you?"

As the run-stealers flicker to and fro.

A great flash of pain burned across his whole body, and everything went dark again.

The M.C.C. flag, drooping above the clock-tower. The tiered, white seats all round. The wide glass windows over the Members' Balcony. The news-reel cameras on their tower. A cluster of figures watching from a factory roof. This was Lord's Cricket Ground. He recognized it. The Australians, in their bunchy, long-peaked caps, small, bronzed men, all on their toes, fighters to the last ditch. He patted the crease. He looked up at the scoreboard. His score was ninety-eight. The bowler was running up—that loping indefatigable stride. The ball was pitching a little short, well to the off. He flashed his bat at it in a sweet, controlled square cut. Backward point, cover point left standing. The rattle of the ball against the stand merged into the louder roaring of the crowd. The roaring came nearer. It was in his own ears.

Water splashed over Peter Braithwaite's head. The real voices began again.

In spite of everything, a miraculous sense of strength welled up in him. His head was suddenly clear, but he knew this clarity would not last long. He had had his vision, now he must obey its prompting.

"All right, I'll talk. I can't stand any more of this. For God's sake give me a drink and let me stand up," he said, surprised by the weakness of his own voice. They had to guide the water to his mouth. He stood up, staggered, clutched at the work-bench for support. He was all in, they knew. They'd made a sorry mess of him. Half in horror at their own handiwork, half with a kind of respect, the men made way for him as he swayed and staggered over the floor.

That was their mistake. Before they realized what he was after, before any one could lay a hand on him, Peter's feet had carried him in a drunken, faltering rush across the bench where, on first entering, he had noticed the man filling bombs. With his right hand—his left was horribly crushed—he took up a bomb. The charging figures stopped dead a few feet away from him, as if they had been checked by an invisible ray. They began to back, showing their teeth, surly or whimpering. Instinctively they pressed themselves close against the wall, leaving Peter's way clear to the far entrance of the underground passage.

But he could not make it. He knew that. They would not dare to attack him for fear of detonating the bomb, but he had not enough strength to carry him through the passage. Already he felt the mists swirling back. Tooley had said they were deep down here. Peter hoped he was right. He didn't want to kill innocent people.

He tossed the bomb meditatively up and down in his hand. So, on the cricket-field, he would juggle with the ball at the end of an over before throwing it to the new bowler. The action was quite unconscious. Peter was only deciding where he could best throw the bomb in order to make sure that the whole dump would go up; but it made the five men wince and shut tight their eyes.

"Here, look here, mate," one of them quavered. "Call it quits. We'll let you go. Straight, we will."

Gritting his teeth, Peter Braithwaite came away from the support of the bench. He'd take it standing up, not like those quitters grovelling against the wall over there. His last words were characteristic, and not unworthy of his life and death.

"Well, I always did like fireworks," he said, and with the unerring, side-arm flick which had surprised many confident run-stealers before now, he jerked the bomb bails-high at a heap of cases in the far corner of the arsenal. . . .

A policeman, passing along the road that bordered the waste land, felt the earth shake beneath his feet. A great, thudding, suffocated cough and rumble seemed to come up from the earth. The policeman had been brought up in a mining village; he had heard that kind of noise before, and knew what it meant. But there were no pit-galleries under here. The derelict factory caught his eye. It was tottering, collapsing, falling in upon itself and sliding down to the ground like shale. "Here, what's all this?" said the policeman from force of habit. He blew his whistle and started running out onto the waste ground. . . .

At Trent Bridge the second over was just beginning. Joe Marston ran up to bowl; but before he reached the crease the green turf quivered and the bails fell off the wickets at both ends. Joe Marston stopped dead. "Eh, lad, it's an earthquake," he said to the umpire. A wag in the crowd yelled out:

"Hey, Joe, you're putting on weight!"

The crowd roared. It was as good a valediction as any for Peter Braithwaite.

Chapter 13

The Episode of the Unforced Landing

Thus, in dark passages, innocent villages, street corners, shady little shops, and no less behind the plate glass of great offices or the elegant façades of country mansions, was waged the undeclared war between Sir John Strangeways' men and the E.B. As the year turned towards autumn, Chilton Canteloe's campaign for his unemployment plan alternated with European crisis and rumour of crisis to keep Britain's nerves on the stretch. Like the first symptoms of a plague, ugly incidents began to break out sporadically over the country; a riot here, an attempted assassination or unexplained piece of sabotage there, sudden panics on the Stock Exchange, hints and rumours flawing the calm surface of English life. Public opinion was bewildered and growing resentful. The European dictators continued on their triumphal path. Our own government, thought the man in the street, seemed to have lost its nerve entirely; it made concession after concession abroad, while at home it was dilly-dallying over the Chilton plan that had so kindled public enthusiasm. This inarticulate resentment was cleverly exploited by the E.B., whose policy was, by constantly embarrassing the present government, to discredit the principle of parliamentary government altogether.

The events of the autumn soon put out of people's minds that nine-day wonder of August, when the headlines had flared with "Disappearance of Test Cricketer." This sensation relegated to a quarter-column of an unimportant page the seismic disturbance which had been felt throughout Trent Bridge ground and its immediate environs. Several newspaper humorists had made cracks about the relative news-value of earthquakes and English cricketers, but no closer connexion was made between the two events as far as the public was concerned. Frank Haskings, who had received Peter's note and directed the police to 420 Easthwaite Street, was sworn to secrecy. The police had found Sam Silver's basement with its furniture curiously deranged by the blast of the explosion. Digging through the blocked passage, they discovered enough to tell them what had been going on in the undeground chamber. Sir John Strangeways got it announced that a secret arms-dump of the I.R.A. had accidentally blown up; in private, thrusting out of his mind the merry face of Peter Braithwaite and the familiar figure he would never again see at Lords, he set to work on the plan he had received from Georgia.

Georgia herself, though Sir John sent no word, has put two and two together. So when, a week after her departure from Chilton Ashwell, Chilton rang up and invited her to lunch at the Berkeley, she knew that she would now be facing her most difficult ordeal. Chilton might well suspect that her relation with Peter Braithwaite had been more than a personal friendship, though of this he could surely have no proof. At the same time, she must act the part of a woman who was a member of the E.B. and thus could make a pretty accurate guess as to what had really lain behind the "Nottingham earthquake" and Peter's disappearance. It was going to be a ticklish business.

Many heads turned in the Berkeley dining-room when Georgia and Chilton entered. Indeed, she felt her own head in danger of being turned by the obsequious array of waiters clustering round their table, the gorgeous sheaf of dark-red roses that Chilton had ordered for her, the solicitous way he arranged for her comfort. She felt like a favourite aunt taken out to lunch by a charming schoolboy nephew. His pleasure in her company seemed almost *naïf,* as if playing the host was a new and entrancing game for him.

She could not help being flattered, too, by the way he deferred to her opinion. He had considerable holdings in China, and asked her about the Chinese "backdoor," the road recently constructed by Chiang Kai-shek to the Burmese frontier. Having travelled in this country, though not since the road was built, she could give him a fair idea of the conditions and the potentialities for transport which the new road opened up. Absorbed in this subject, she was taken unawares when Chilton said:

"And, talking of travel, where's Peter Braithwaite pushed off to?"

"Peter? I only wish I knew. I simply can't understand it."

"You don't think he'd got into any trouble, or had a brainstorm or something, and decided to go off on a trip?"

"Oh, no, that's impossible. He seemed perfectly himself last week-end, and he'd never go off and leave his team in the lurch like that, unless he'd gone crazy. Besides, with all the rumpus the papers have been making about it, he'd have been found by now."

"Well, then, what was it? Suicide? He never seemed that type to me. Murder? Kidnapping? That's an idea! Kidnap Peter Braithwaite and sting the M.C.C. for a whacking ransom. They'll need him in Australia."

Chilton realized at once that his flippancy had struck a jarring note for her. "I'm sorry, my dear," he went on, "he was so full of life and humour, it's difficult to think anything serious could have happened to him. I was forgetting what a great friend of yours he is."

You smooth, handsome devil, you weren't forgetting anything, Georgia thought. You like operating on people's feelings without anaesthetics.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I don't feel I really knew—know him well, though. I got the impression that there's more to him than the cricket-field idol. I wonder——"

"Yes?"

"This I.R.A. dump that blew up at Nottingham. You don't suppose Peter was mixed up in that somehow?"

She contemplated Chilton from under her long lashes. His gold-flecked eyes expressed nothing but surprise and incredulity.

"Why, however——?"

"Well, he might have been working for the police. After all, he *was* seen last in Nottingham. The police said the bodies were unrecognizable, but it may just have suited their book not to admit that Peter——"

"Oh, come now, Georgia, that's fantastic. You'll be saying next that it wasn't an I.R.A. dump at all, but a German plot or something." He gave her one of his most engaging smiles. "Now, if any one gives me the impression of living a double life of that kind, it's you."

Georgia glanced back at him candidly, her brown eyes twinkling. "And why do you pick on me, sir, for these dreadful insinuations?"

"You're a woman in love with adventure. Everyone knows that. And you have the ability, the means to gratify it. Instead of which we find you trotting round dull house-parties and lunching with me at the Berkeley. It's very suspicious. There must be something behind it."

"Perhaps lunching with you at the Berkeley is an adventure?"

"I wish I could believe you meant that," he said in a different voice, gazing deep into her eyes.

"For a middle-aged, provincial woman? Of course it is."

"Don't belittle yourself, my dear. It's not in character."

They were like two deadly enemies, groping for each other in a pitch-dark room, thought Georgia. There was a certain wariness about Chilton, even when his words, his tone of voice made love to her. Even had she been willing, she believed that to yield to him would not solve her problem; beneath his attentions, his lively interest, lay the profound indifference of the egoist. She could only hold him by keeping him at arm's length.

Georgia decided that the moment had come for an attacking move. Attack was the best defence, and it was vitally necessary to dispel his suspicion that she might be working against him. Burying her face in the sheaf of roses he had given her, she said:

"I wish I knew how far I could trust you."

"Trust me? You sound very much *en grand serieux,* my dear."

"Have you ever heard of the E.B.?" she asked, not looking up.

His fingers twiddled the stem of his wineglass. "The E.B.? It sounds very mysterious. What is it?"

She could tell by his voice that he had been disconcerted. She went on to describe the harmless mysticism of the English Banner, very much as Alice Mayfield had described it to her months ago. And Chilton made much the same comment as she herself had made to Alice.

"My dear! Playing at mediaevalism? Surely *you're* not taken up with that kind of nostalgic nonsense?"

Well, well, she thought with secret amusement; to think that I should be trying to convert the leader of the E.B. to his own movement. She said:

"Put like that, it is nonsense. And the English Banner is a bit absurd and cranky. But don't you think the principle behind it is sound? The principle that some men are born to rule the rest? I used to be all for democracy, but recent history doesn't show it up in a very favourable light. Look at the mess England has been making of things lately."

"Have you gone fascist?"

"You can't frighten me with words. I don't like their methods, but they get things done. We don't want that kind of fascism over here. We might create a new brand of aristocracy, though, a home-made product. I'd have thought you would approve. That speech of yours, when you first launched the Chilton Plan—you sounded impatient enough with parliamentary government. And there's yourself." For the first time she looked straight at him, her eyes glowing. "You have all the qualities of a great ruler——"

"Now, my dear. You flatter me."

"—Except ambition, should I say? Except the nerve for responsibility."

"I'm responsible for quite a lot already."

"Oh, I don't mean your high finance, your unemployment plans, your philanthropy and your racehorses. Can't you think bigger than that? You'd be—" She broke off sharply, as though afraid she would betray too much.

"And what is all this leading up to, little Georgia?"

His glance was quizzical. He was evidently enjoying the joke, and she believed he had no idea now that she shared it. But there was a suppressed excitement in his face too, a thinly-disguised leaping of pride.

"Leading up to?" she replied cautiously. "That's really for you to say. Leading up to a leader—a man who could be a great leader. If he had the right organization behind him."

"But, supposing there was such an organization, wouldn't it have chos—wouldn't it choose its own leader?"

"I don't know anything about that. All I know is that the best man should, and would, get to the top."

Chilton laughed pleasantly. "Well, good luck to him. I'm too lazy. I can't keep up with you and your voices, Madam Joan of Arc Strangeways. You won't make me a Dauphin of your storm . . . Unless——"

"Unless?"

He leant forward over the table, picked up one of the roses, and touched her thin brown hand with it. "If you loved me, I might do great things. Yes, I might surprise myself."

"No, Chilton. Please . . . Not yet."

There was a short silence. Then he said, "So you're Dedicated to the Cause, are you?" He had recovered his gay, bantering manner. For the rest of the lunch he teased her and flirted with her gently. Georgia felt convinced that the load of suspicion had been taken off his mind. The position between them, though, seemed to have developed into a stalemate, and such it remained for the next three months. They went about together a great deal, few days passing when Georgia did not receive from him a present of flowers, an invitation to dinner, theatre or concert. She for her part kept up towards him an attitude of cool, elusive affection; at intervals she hinted at the existence of the E.B., but Chilton—as elusive here as herself—refused either to promise his support or admit any complicity. It was a war of attrition between them, whose incidents gave her a deeper understanding of his complex character but brought her no nearer to the E.B.'s secret—the plans for the rising which, she was convinced, must be in Chilton's possession.

Time was growing short. Georgia was burdened by the knowledge of how much depended upon her. Sir John Strangeways could only take direct action against Chilton as a last resort. The millionaire's influence in the country was so great that, if Sir John took the offensive—intercepted Chilton's correspondence, for instance, or sent agents to ransack secretly his town and country houses—and they were discovered, his own position as head of C. Department would be in the gravest jeopardy. Besides, he did not want to explode the mine prematurely. "Give them rope and they'll hang themselves" was the motto of his department. But, Georgia feared, Chilton was a person who made other, less desirable uses of the rope you allowed him. . . .

It was not till the last week of November that the break came. Chilton had invited her to another house-party, and was flying her down to Chilton Ashwell in his private plane. He was in terrific good spirits that afternoon, like a schoolboy who has received an unexpected half-holiday. He piloted the plane himself. Now and then, out of sheer exuberance, he gambolled with it in the air, then turned towards her his flushed face and sparkling eyes as if to make sure that she too was enjoying the fun. The green checker-board of the country streamed and tilted beneath them. Chilton pointed down, put his lips to the speaking-tube.

"All the kingdoms of the earth, Georgia. Don't you feel tempted? Or would you rather have the sun and the sky? Look, I'll lay them at your feet."

He turned the machine over and they were flying upside down, the illimitable sky beneath their feet. Georgia could not help being charmed, exhilarated by her enemy's lovemaking. He carried it off so much in the grand manner. Not long afterwards they flew over a sprawling, industrial city. Chilton came down low, so that she saw the honeycomb of streets and houses enlarged. Towards the town's outskirts there lay an open patch of green, with small figures scurrying over it.

"Oh, look, they're playing football," she said. "I haven't seen a football match for ages."

"Well, you shall see one now. We'll go and watch."

At first Georgia assumed that he intended to fly to and fro over the playing-fields; but he cut out his engine and began to circle down, and she realized with a pang of horror that he intended to land down there amongst all those tiny midgets whose faces were already beginning to turn up to them like white flowers opening in the sun.

"No, Chilton, you mustn't," she exclaimed. "I didn't mean—it's too dangerous. You'll get into fearful trouble."

" 'She lived in storm and strife.' Another adventure for you, my dear. Besides, the engine's cut out. I expect the petrol-feed is choked. Better to land here than on one of those roofs."

He grinned mischievously at her. So that's how he proposes to get away with it. Pretend it was a forced landing. He must be mad. Of course he's mad.

"Stop showing off, Chilton," she cried. "It's contemptible."

But he paid not the least attention. Showmanship on this scale left you gasping. You might as well have accused the Great Ziegfeld of showing off. They were very low now. The playing-fields and those small figures, some breaking wildly to either side, a few seemingly paralyzed in the airplane's path, rushed towards them with horribly-increasing momentum. A larger figure dashed out and pulled two of the smaller ones aside. Georgia realized that they were children who had been playing here, who at any moment might be cut down in swathes by the hurtling machine.

When they had come to a standstill and Chilton opened the plane door, he was confronted by an angry group of men and women. They looked ripe for lynching him. Furious with him as Georgia was, she could not help admiring the blend of effrontery and authority with which he carried it off. Stooping in the narrow door, he yet contrived to dominate that cluster of people. He jumped down, shook hands with the man who had dragged the two children away from the plane's path, apologized for his forced landing, reassured himself that no one had been hurt, explained why he had been forced to come down here, invited the two children into the plane, kissed them and helped them up—all in a few moments. Then he set to work to repair the imaginary defect in his engine. By the time the inevitable policeman appeared, Chilton had finished his "repair." "My name's Canteloe—Lord Chilton Canteloe," he told the policeman, and after that the affair became a mere formality. What's in a name? thought Georgia disgustedly. If he'd killed half a dozen of those children, he could still have bought himself out of it.

"Now you're not really angry with me, are you?" he said, taking her arm. "I told you nothing would happen."

And Georgia, who dared not alienate him too far, let him lead her on to the touchline, where they watched some of the bigger boys playing football for a while.

"You know, you might have killed some of them," was all she said.

"Well, I didn't. Don't fuss, my dear, it's not like you," he replied indifferently.

At that moment Georgia perceived the whole depth and implication of his irresponsibility. He was infinitely more dangerous than a man who has a positive lust for killing and destruction. Such a man sooner or later is betrayed or driven mad by his own lust. But Chilton simply did not care much, one way or the other. Without venom or compunction he would brush aside people who blocked his way, just as he had so nearly swept away those children standing in the path of the plane. He had, abnormally developed, the egoist's profound indifference to all human life but his own. He had the splinter of ice in his heart.

But how well it was concealed! Who would have guessed that these children meant no more to him than buzzing flies, when he and Georgia walked back to the plane once more. The children came running from all over the field. Chilton waved gaily to them, smacked their bottoms, had them in a minute cleared away from the course so that he could get a good run up into the wind. They were all hero-worshippers from the word go. Chilton, opening his pocket-book, called out to them:

"I'll fly back over the field and throw these two ten-bob notes out of the plane. Whoever touches one first, keeps it. No grabbing, you young ruffians. And don't spend it all on drink."

They were off, to a shrill, ragged volley of cheering. Chilton circled and flew back, throwing out the notes downwind. Georgia could see them fluttering away, and the crowd of children swaying backwards and forwards below, like flowers, their white faces upturned.

Chapter 14

The Episode of the Terrestrial Globe

Looking back later upon the events of that desperate year, Georgia was to reflect how tiny had been the straws that had shown her which way the wind was blowing. An uncut hedge was her introduction to the E.B. conspiracy; a half-open door finally revealed to her the truth, and ushered her into the most tense and dangerous week of her whole life. During this week the whole force of the E.B. was mustered against her. She was a fugitive who carried next her heart, as a refugee might carry her firstborn through a country where every man's hand seemed hostile, the safety of a civilization. Though she always denied it, Sir John was probably right when he said afterwards that no other living woman could have won against such odds.

It was late afternoon, and the mist was beginning to settle down over the oaks and rusty bracken of Chilton Ashwell, when they touched down on the landing-field. The leaden, midland mist gave the house a lack-lustre appearance and tarnished the waters of the lake. But Chilton's good spirits, that air of suppressed excitement he had manifested all day, seemed quite unabated. Later, as the other guests arrived, Georgia realized its cause. It was a gathering of the clans. Mr. Leeming, the banker, with his wizened face and inevitable tube of digestion tablets; Hargreaves Steele, the puckish mouth and the fanatic eyes; the great armaments-manufacturer, Almayne Kennedy, who looked like a sidesman in a fashionable church—and maybe was: they were all here.

"You must treat them nicely, Georgia. They're the chief backers of the Chilton Plan. So mind your step, and keep a watch on that witty, outspoken tongue of yours," said Chilton. "You'll be playing hostess for me, remember."

The Chilton Plan, she thought. What an excellent cover for them. And I'm to be hostess to the leaders of the E.B.—the tragic irony is laying itself on thick, I must say. It looks as if things are going to start moving soon.

The Friday evening passed off without any incident, except that

Chilton and Georgia won a considerable sum of money off Mr. Leeming and Lady Almayne Kennedy at bridge. They seemed almost instinctively to understand each other's play. The long duel of wits had created this sympathy between them, so that they could lead each other on with audacious bids that kept their opponents guessing all the time.

Next morning Chilton went into conference with his associates. Georgia would have liked to listen at the door; but, in broad daylight, with servants passing up and down the corridor, the risk was too great. It was purely by accident that, just after the conference had broken up, she happened to be passing the study door when Chilton's secretary came out, and before he closed it behind him she noticed Chilton standing by his desk, in profile to her, his hands stretched out over the big globe that rested on a corner of the desk. His mouth was graven in that dreamy, conqueror's smile which she had seen on his face three months ago when he stood in the doorway of the marble summerhouse and gazed down on the clock-golf course.

Georgia did not pause for a moment outside the door, but Chilton's gesture and expression bit deep into her mind. At odd moments during the day it recurred to her. There was something symbolic about the way he had been standing there, alone in the room, with the terrestrial globe beneath his hands. But was there not something more—or less—than symbolism in it too? By an association of ideas Georgia began to link the globe with the clock-golf course. The latter had contained a secret; might not the globe also hold some clue, the whole secret of Chilton's ambitions? After all, she mused, the plans must be hidden somewhere here. They were not things one would keep in a safe, because the safes of men like Chilton Canteloe are obvious targets for burglars, which would mean either exposure or blackmail. And why else should the mere touch of his fingers on the globe bring that rare, enigmatic, omnipotent sort of expression to Chilton's face?

Her job was to get hold of those plans. Well, she must start somewhere, and she must certainly start soon. She decided to try the globe on Monday night, when most of the guests would have departed and there would be less danger of interference.

Georgia's long experience as a traveller had impressed on her the importance of detail, of being prepared for any contingency, and at the same time had taught her not to worry about the unknown factor that might crop up at any moment to upset all calculations. The unknown factor now was the globe itself. She might be unable to open it; or her hunch that it contained the plans might very well be wrong. So much had to be accepted. Assuming I do get possession of the plans, she asked herself, what next? First, I must as far as possible memorize them, in case the E.B. succeed in getting them back again. Second, I must discover the best method of conveying them to Uncle John. To memorize them, I shall probably need four or five hours at least, which means I should not leave here till the next morning. In any case it would be difficult to get away at night with all the cars locked up in the garage and the chauffeurs sleeping above.

I must leave, then, all open and above board, on Tuesday morning. But suppose Chilton finds the plans are missing? I'd never reach London alive. Well, my girl, the answer to that is for you to take Chilton with you —ask him to fly you back in his plane. Ask nicely, and he'll do anything for the little woman. And it will ensure you getting at least to the London airport in safety.

The daring of the plan brought a sparkle into her pensive eyes. She went off straight away, and asked Chilton if he was returning to London on Tuesday and could take her with him. Yes, he was, and he would. He'd fly her to the Isles of the Hesperides, if she only said the word. So far, so good. But these were only the bold outlines of a plan; filling in the detail, working out alternatives in the event of something going wrong, took up all the time she had off from being sociable with her fellow-guests and eluding Chilton's ardour. Those two days he turned all the batteries of his charm upon her, as though in an unconscious knowledge that zero-hour was fast approaching. There were moments when he almost convinced her that this was the reality and all her suspicions of him only a plausible but incoherent nightmare.

At last Monday night came. Half-past twelve chimed from the clock downstairs. Georgia got out of bed, dressed in black coat and skirt, crept from her room on to the landing, down the broad sweep of the stairs. Chilton had gone to bed earlier than usual, to get a good sleep before their early start next day. Now she was in the great hall. The eyes of all those painted Canteloes on the walls—she could imagine them following her in the dark with their insolent curiosity. She shut the study door on them. Stay outside and mind your own business, my popeyed friends. The study curtains were drawn close. Good. Georgia put her small torch back in her pocket, and switched on the shaded light over Chilton's desk. Now for the globe.

There it stood, bland, shiny, uncommunicative, telling her little she did not know about the countries mapped on its surface, and nothing about the business on hand. Topical yet absurdly irrelevant phrases floated across her mind as she fiddled with the globe, trying to find a secret hinge, a spring, a way to open up the obstinate brute. Showing the world to the world. This dark terrestrial ball. Globetrotter all at sea with a globe. The cubic area of a sphere is . . .

No, it was no good. The damned thing was all one piece. Or its hemispheres as firmly welded as creation itself. She had drawn the wrong number. Yet the picture of Chilton standing here on Saturday morning, his fingers caressing the globe, refused to budge from her mind. She strove to recall exactly the position of his hands as she had seen them then. It seemed a forlorn hope, for the globe might well have been turned round since. But she persevered, gently pressing the smooth surface, over and over again, shifting her fingers slightly each time, till at last there came a faint, reluctant click from somewhere in the globe's big belly. At the same instant, a section of it was depressed by the pressure of her right hand, and she found she could slide it inwards, exposing a gap ten inches square. Trembling a little with excitement, she put her hand into the hole, felt a mechanism of rods and springs, then, deeper down, papers. Sheaves of paper. Eureka! She began cautiously to pull them out from the globe.

"She put in her thumb and she pulled out a plum and said what a bad girl am I." The familiar voice froze her dead. "Wouldn't you like a bit more light on the scene, Georgia? It'll try your beautiful eyes, reading all that stuff."

Chilton Canteloe switched on the central lights. The revolver in his hand was pointed at her stomach. He said quickly:

"And don't yell for help, because if you do this gun'll go off and I shall have to explain that I thought it was a burglar and shot you by mistake, Georgia darling, you twister, you little bitch."

Georgia recovered her self-control in a moment. She had not come entirely unprepared for this. She flipped over a few pages of the document she had taken from the globe, then looked up at him, her eyes shining.

"So it *is* you, Chilton," she said enthusiastically. "I *knew* it. I was sure you must be our leader, but I had to prove it to myself. Why ever didn't you tell me? You could have trusted me. I was sick of all this mystery-making. A good many of us are, for that matter."

Chilton stared at her with sleepy interest. His tousled hair, the slim body in the dark-blue silk dressing-gown, made him look twenty. He said:

"It's a good performance, but it's wasted on me."

Georgia's eyes opened wide. Her voice quavered pathetically. "Chilton, don't. You—you don't think I'm——?"

"I know you're a spy. We suspected it at the start. Then you lulled our suspicions for a while, I admit. But not altogether. That's why I kept you near me. I wanted to have my eye on you."

She knew he was lying. He was not the man to confess, even now when she was in his power, that she had taken him in so thoroughly. She wanted time to think, to plan the next move.

"You're making a terrible mistake. I've been heart and soul in the E.B. from the beginning. It's lost me most of my friends. But—don't you see? —I had to make certain that the right person was at the head of it. I tried to make you tell me, but you wouldn't. Then, the other morning, I saw you with this globe in your hands, and I had an intuition——"

"Intuition! Georgia, you're losing your form, you're getting rattled." He smiled at her pleasantly, almost regretfully. After his first outburst, he had controlled himself to this gentle, teasing manner that frightened her far more than any threats.

"There's a little gadget in that globe," he went on, "which rings a buzzer in my bedroom when it's opened. I'm not so simple as you thought, my dear. I'm sorry a burglar-alarm should have come between us, though. I was growing quite fond of you."

"Well, what are you going to do about it? Hand me over to the police?"

" 'The warm water of your mawkish police'?" Chilton quoted. "Oh, no. I'm afraid you've got yourself into hotter water than that. You'll have to be—disposed of."

"I see. And what good will that do you?"

He shrugged. "Isn't that obvious?"

Georgia knew she must change her tactics; there was no use telling him the tale any longer.

"It's not obvious at all," she said, the deadly quietness of her voice matching his own. "John Strangeways knows all about you. I recognized you at the Nebuchadnezzar party—the woman in the locket. And we know the position of your six armament dumps, too. That clock-golf course was a mistake. You should try and conquer your habit of showing off."

Chilton crossed his knees, transferred the revolver to his left hand, lit a cigarette with the right.

"That's better," he said. "Now we know where we stand, we can be more cosy. What a nuisance women are! That means I shall have to shift my dumps before we get going. Well, these things can always be managed."

"Yes, I know, money talks. There's just one thing you egoists lousy with money forget. And that is, the country's full of decent people who don't take bribes and look upon your values as utterly contemptible."

"There are quite enough who *do* take bribes, my dear. Besides, there are more ways of bribing a man than with money. You can offer power, excitement, revenge, or a dream of better things. My dream is selling very well just now."

"Your dream! It's a dirty delirium, that's all. It hasn't even a hope of coming true now. Our people have got you taped. Even suppose you start your rising at all—a few innocents will be killed, and a few enthusiasts. Then you'll collapse. Chilton Canteloe will get away, no doubt, like other scared, shady financiers before him. I can imagine you, rotting away somewhere in South America, the would-be dictator, growing fat, dirt under his fingernails, beginning to stink—a pathetic figure you'll cut, for any one who has pity to waste. . . . Why are you clutching that revolver so tight? Look, your knuckles have gone white."

"I should very much like to take you into the cellars and beat you to a pulp. Perhaps I shall, but——"

"Listen to the Nazi-imitator! Can't you be more original? You're just a spoilt, vicious child, eaten up with vanity. A Prince Charming who's begun to grow old and threadbare. A contortionist going stiff in the joints."

It was not so much her words as the lashing contempt of her voice that stung Chilton Canteloe. For months he had been exercising all his charm upon her, taking her final response for granted. The contemptuous indifference she now showed hit him in his sole unguarded spot. He stared at her uncomprehendingly, his lip pouting like a sulky boy's. She thought for a moment that he was going to cry. Then he controlled himself and said:

"Yes, you're quite clever. But not clever enough. You think the E.B. rising is going to fail. You're quite right. *I intend it to fail.* You see," he added naïvely, "there's a world of difference between cleverness and genius. Cleverness adapts itself to fate, genius adapts fate to itself. The great man has the courage of his own immorality—he stands above morality."

"I seem to have heard all this before."

"That plan you're hugging to your bosom—you may read it before you die, if you like, it's quite immaterial—we'll call it Plan A. But there's also a Plan B, which you and the rest of the second-rate snoopers know nothing of. It's much simpler. I could write it on a sheet of notepaper, but I prefer to keep it in my head. Have you ever wondered why the rank-and-file of the E.B. have not been told the name of their leader? Perhaps not. You lack subtlety. You've got a niggling, second-rate mind, like that hired keyhole-watcher, your husband."

"It's wonderful how unimpressive you are in the rôle of Genius Through the Ages," she chuckled.

Chilton sprang up and smacked her across the mouth. "As I was saying, there's this Plan B. I should like you to realize what you've been up against. It should comfort your last hour to know that you could never really have been expected to succeed."

At first Georgia had thought he was bluffing; then that he was off his head with megalomania. As he talked, however, revealing Plan B and the depth of his own infamy, she realized he was neither a bluffer nor a lunatic. She perceived, too, the real secret of the clock-golf course. It was a symbol not so much of the E.B. organization as of his own intention to betray it. He had not anticipated that any one would read the secret of that green turf, yet it was a revelation—an unconscious one, perhaps—of his double treachery.

For Plan B, as he had said, was simple enough. Chilton intended the rising to take place in the way mapped out by Plan A. Arms would have been distributed from the secret dumps to the revolutionaries a week or two beforehand, while his agents were creating a panic on the Stock Exchange and disseminating rumours that the new Popular Government was on the point of involving us in a war with the Axis Powers, taking away the small man's savings, socializing industry. Then, when the country had been keyed up to the right pitch of bewilderment, indecision, hysteria, the rising would break out. Leading Cabinet Ministers would be kidnapped or assassinated, Broadcasting House and the B.B.C. stations in the provinces would be occupied, the Civil Service thrown into confusion, the daily papers compelled to close down or print under E.B. orders; and finally, when the nerve centres of government were paralyzed, an ultimatum would be delivered to parliament backed up by flights of bombers over Westminster. Parliament must hand over to the E.B. council, or they and half London would be destroyed.

"At this point," said Chilton, with that infectious smile which Georgia now loathed like the plague, "at this point, when the E.B. await the setting-up of their dictator, I shall intervene. I shall call a conference of the E.B. leaders, put it to them that they must not be led by their initial successes into thinking that the whole country is theirs, and suggest a compromise. My key men on the E.B. Inner Council are, of course, aware of this manoeuvre and have a majority vote. They will vote me into the position of Guardian of Public Safety. A good idea, 'First Guardian,' don't you think? The English like the idea of being looked after, without having to admit any filial piety. You see the point of all this? I shall be announced to Britain, first as a mediator, then as First Guardian of the Committee of Public Safety. The politicians have utterly failed to control the situation; the country is in a state of anarchy; the public confusion and my own personal popularity will do the rest. The man in the street will have no idea, certainly no proof, that I was behind the original rising. The E.B. rank-and-file may think what they like—they'll have no proof either—that's why I have been so careful not to let the identity of their leader be revealed to them. Most of them will accept me, either as their real leader or as the best compromise. A few may kick; they'll be dealt with. I should add that my partners—my future partners in the Axis—are awaiting events with great interest. Should we have more difficulty than I expect in overcoming opposition at the outset, they have promised to lend me a hand."

"I see," said Georgia disgustedly. "All you and your precious E.B. amount to is a sort of Fifth Column, first to give your jack-booted friends an opportunity for attacking England, and then to stab us in the back while we're being attacked. You're even more contemptible than I imagined."

Chilton Canteloe rose to his feet, the silk dressing-gown rustling, the revolver steady in his hand. He went on as if she had not spoken.

"Another advantage of my position will be that I can get rid in a perfectly legal manner of any of my associates whom I distrust. Our countrymen dislike purges; but, in a state of emergency, they're willing to bury their heads in the sand and let someone else do the dirty work for them—provided it's done with all the legal paraphernalia, a chaplain in attendance, and officials to sign the document in triplicate. Yes, if any one cuts up rough, I can dispose of him in the most correct manner. Far more correctly, I'm afraid, than I shall dispose of you, Georgia." Chilton had quite recovered his good humour. "Oh, dear, what a pity I have to kill you. I feel you would have inspired me to even greater heights."

"When you've finished talking, you might get on with it. Or haven't you the nerve? I suppose even your dirty work must be done by proxy."

"What a heroine! Game to the last! You ought to be in a book. I've not had time to arrange the details of your demise. And I'm sure you want to read Plan A. We'll say, half an hour, shall we? It'll give me time to consult Hargreaves Steele. Lucky he stayed over tonight. I don't know whether he's got any of his maggots with him. If not, I'm sure a fertile brain like his will be able to think up something. In the meanwhile——"

He motioned with his revolver. Georgia was almost tempted to fling herself at him. A bullet would be better than Professor Steele's iniquities. But she restrained herself. She had half an hour, and she knew Chilton's secret now—knew him for a double traitor, a traitor both to his country and to the E.B. movement itself. She must give her knowledge a last chance of survival. She picked up her bag and the papers, and walked in front of him out of the room.

The revolver close behind her, she was forced to walk into the east wing of Chilton Ashwell. The wing was temporarily closed; she knew that if she called for help it would not be heard. They reached the top floor, and he pushed her into a small bedroom.

"The light's in working order, I see. You'll be able to read," he said. "I'm afraid there are no sheets on the bed; but perhaps that's just as well—a dangerous girl like you might tear them up for a rope and let herself out of the window like heroines do in books when there's a fire. Well, so long. You've had your adventure, haven't you? Oh, but one minute, though."

With a sense of revulsion that stiffened her body to stone, she felt his hand ruffling through her hair. He gave it a little tweak, just enough to hurt her.

"No, I thought you didn't use hairpins. But I had to make sure. You're such a resourceful girl, aren't you? And they say locks can be opened with hairpins. Now just let me look at that bag of yours."

Not taking his eyes off hers or deflecting the muzzle of the revolver, he ran his hand through her bag, laid out its contents on the mantelpiece. Then he glanced at them.

"No skeleton keys. No tablet of cyanide," he said, crowing over her a little. He was not a graceful winner. "No, Georgia, you disappoint me. You're not such an efficient spy as I should have thought. In half an hour's time, then."

Chapter 15

The Episode of the Foggy Morning

Locked in the stuffy little bedroom, Georgia's first instinct was to get some air. Opening the window, she looked out. It was a dark, foggy night. The wall went sheer down; there was no parapet, no drainpipe or moulding to offer a slight hope of escape that way. She bit her lip thoughtfully. If the worst came to the worst, she could throw herself out of the window; better this than being left to Hargreaves Steele's devices. Perhaps that was what Chilton wanted her to do. She imagined him waiting for the fall, taking off her clothes, dressing her body in her nightgown. He could say she had been sleep-walking, it would save him a lot of trouble.

With an effort she wrenched her mind away from these useless speculations. She looked at her wrist-watch. It was nearly quarter to three. How time flies. At ten past three. . . . Forget it, you still have time. She examined the lock of the door. It was a stout, old-fashioned one. Chilton Ashwell was built to last. And there was nothing in the room with which the lock could be forced. There was nothing in the room but an empty washstand, a small arm-chair, a cupboard, and the bed with a pile of blankets on one end.

The foggy night-air blowing in made her shiver. She did not like to shut the window; with it open, she felt not quite so hopelessly a prisoner. She lay down on the bed and pulled the blankets over her. She tried to think of Nigel, the Devonshire cottage, the lovely landscape now drawn out in the clean lines of winter. But Chilton Canteloe's smiling, merciless face came between her and the comforting vision. His words wove backwards and forwards in her head, like an argument one has thought of too late. "A heroine," he had called her mockingly. "You've had your adventure." "Like heroines do in books when there's a fire."

A fire! Georgia's heart leapt up. He had all unwittingly offered her a hope of release. By heaven, he should have his blasted fire! She couldn't force the lock, but she might burn down the whole door. Her hand went to her mouth, swollen where Chilton had hit her. Fire was the one thing she had always, from a child, been terrified of. Well, there was always the open window if she failed.

But how could she start a fire? You can't just set a match to a door. On the mantelpiece were laid out the contents of her bag, amongst them a nail-file and petrol-lighter. Thank goodness she had filled it this morning. She stabbed the file into the mattress on which she had been lying, ripped it along, pulled out the flock in handfuls and piled it against the door. She opened the cupboard doors. The shelves were lined with paper. She crumpled paper under the flock, unscrewed her lighter and poured the petrol over the heap. Then she put a match to it.

In the draught from the window a flame blazed up. Carefully she nursed its precarious life, adding paper, then a drawer from the wash-stand, then, as the fire began to draw more steadily, piling the rest of the mattress on it. Would Chilton and Steele hear the crackling, wherever they were? Skirmishing flames began to venture farther afield, licking along the wooden panelling on either side of the door. Fog and smoke stung Georgia's eyes, rasped her throat. The crescent of fire was advancing towards her in stealthy little rushes. It was coming too fast. No, it was dawdling, Chilton would be back before . . .

Hurriedly Georgia stuffed the papers inside her dress, stowed in her pocket the money that lay on the mantelpiece; she could not be encumbered with a bag now. The door was a sheet of flame now, and in a few minutes the whole room would be a furnace. It was either the door or the window for her. She wrapped the blankets close about her head and body, and threw herself against the blazing door. The panels gave, but the lock still held firm. Sobbing with the agony of flame and smoke, Georgia recoiled, reeled back to the window, gulped the harsh, foggy air. Then she picked up the arm-chair and ran at the door again, ramming it with the chair. This time, in a shower of sparks and a great swirl of smoke, the door fell outwards.

Georgia flung down the blankets and sped along the landing, down the narrow stairs. At the bottom was a green baize-covered door which shut off this part of the house. Georgia felt for the handle, turned it. Chilton had locked the door from the outside. She was still in the trap and soon all the landing overhead would be ablaze. She turned against the wall, all the fight knocked out of her, and buried her head in her hands. Her hands, stretched up against the wall, encountered a metal frame, felt upwards. It was a fire-extinguisher. It would be as much use against that inferno as a glass of water. Perhaps she could smash open this door with it, though. She took it down from its stand, but at that moment she heard footsteps on the far side of the door, and then the key turned.

"Can't you smell smoke?" said the voice of Hargreaves Steele.

"Don't tell me that little bitch has——"

It all happened in a moment. Georgia had been crouching against the corner of the wall, hoping they would pass her in the dark. But, as Chilton came through the door behind Professor Steele, he switched on the light. In that instant, Georgia banged the knob of the extinguisher hard against the wall. Startled, the two men wheeled round on her, and she directed the stream of liquid full into Chilton Canteloe's eyes, then, as he fell back moaning, clawing at his face, she let Professor Steele have it.

She slipped between their stumbling bodies, locked the door on them, and ran lightly towards the main staircase, switching off lights as she passed. First to her bedroom, where she hurried on her fur coat. No time to pack a bag. David Renton slept on the floor above, the servants high up in another part of the house. As for Chilton and Steele—let them burn, she thought coldly. But the rest ought to be warned. A plan formed itself in her head, its salient points miraculously emerging like a bold landscape out of mist.

Letting herself out of the front door, Georgia ran round the west wing of the house and down the gravelled drive to the garages. She pulled the chain of the great iron bell. Presently the head of Chilton Canteloe's chauffeur appeared at a window above.

"What the hell? Oh, beg pardon, Mrs. Strangeways."

"Quick! The house is on fire! The east wing. We can't get through to the fire brigade. Something's gone wrong with the telephone. Get a car out."

The man came clattering down the stairs. Georgia heard the scrape of the garage door being slid open.

"Shall I drive you, m'm? Best run in to Ashwell and call up the brigades from there."

"No, I'll manage alone. Now wake up every one else who sleeps here. Jump to it, man. One of you run over to the house, and make sure they're all roused up there. Tell the rest to make a relay of buckets."

"We've got an auxiliary fire-engine here, m'm."

"Good. Just start up the car for me first."

The self-starter whirred. Georgia leapt into the driver's seat of the big Rolls. Above the sound of the engine she could hear the chauffeur's shouts and the clanging of the alarm bell. All that din would drown for a while, at any rate, whatever noise Chilton and Steele might be making. Whether the fire or the rescuers reached them first was not of vital importance to her at the moment. She had had to allow them this chance of being rescued, in order to get hold of a car. It would give her a good start at least.

She spun the car out of the yard into the main drive. Fog steamed and streamed in front of her, blunting the beams of the headlights, but Georgia's eye for country, that printed its vivid maps on her memory, enabled her to swing along the curving drive at nearly forty miles an hour. Nearing the park gates, she was seized with apprehension lest Chilton should have already escaped from the burning wing and telephoned the lodge-keeper to stop her.

Yes, the massive iron gates were locked. Well, of course, they always were at night. She kept her finger pressed on the bell till the lodge-keeper emerged.

"Quick! Where's the key? The house is on fire. I'm off to ring up the brigade. All our telephones are out of order."

The old man, stupid with sleep, peered at her fire-blackened face, scratched his head.

"What's to do, m'm?" he said.

"Chilton Ashwell is on fire," she yelled at him. "You're to go up to the house at once. His lordship's orders. Now fetch the key, for heaven's sake."

He fetched it. Georgia sighed with relief. If had not occurred to the old man that they might try ringing up the fire stations from the lodge telephone. She heard his feet clattering away into the fog. Opening the gates, she drove the car through. She locked them behind her and threw the key away into the bracken. There were two other exits from the park, but her pursuers would naturally come first to this one which opened on to the main road.

Pushing the car to the very limit of safety along the Nottingham road, with the windscreen open so that she could see better through the fog, Georgia decided on her next move. On a clear morning, she might have risked driving straight to London. But this fog would slow her down too much. If Chilton was rescued, he would have the E.B. out after her in a twinkling, would probably inform the police too that his car had been stolen, and the car was so easily recognizable. Her first job must be to get rid of it, then.

She stopped at the public call-box in Ashwell to ring up the fire-brigades. They would at least add to the confusion, and possibly hamper

Chilton a bit. Then she sped on towards Nottingham. She drove the car into the yard of the L.N.E.R. station. Luggage. She would be dreadfully conspicuous without any luggage at this time of the morning. Conspicuous! And her grimy face, too. For all she knew her eyebrows and half her hair might have been burnt off. Switching on the inside light a moment she found a mirror. Dear me, I look like the morning after the Witches' Sabbath. What a hag! She began to rub her face with a handkerchief. Before she was half clean, however, another idea struck her.

A hatless, rather grimy woman, arriving at a station at about four o'clock in the morning is bound to be pretty conspicuous anyway. Well, I must trade on that. If the eyes of the railway officials are going to come out on stalks, let them. I daren't bank on Chilton having been destroyed in the fire. Suppose he's survived it. He'll certainly expect me to make for London: he's thorough, so he'll have the trains watched as well as the roads. Therefore I dare not take a London train, unless there's a fast one leaving here very shortly. On the other hand, it'd be no harm for me to give the impression that I'm going to London.

Georgia got out of the car, opened the boot, and extracted from it one of the suitcases with which it was fitted. At the booking office she inquired about the next train to London. It did not run for nearly an hour. She bought a third-class ticket, and walked down towards the platform. The ticket-collector stared curiously at her face, as she complained how bad was the service to London: her car had broken down, and it was most urgent she should get up there quickly. Her dirty face and her ladylike voice made a contrast which impressed itself upon the ticket-collector. His private opinion was that she'd taken a drop too much and smashed her car up. Georgia was indeed reeling a little from fatigue as she descended the steps, though her brain was still too keyed-up to feel it.

The long platform was deserted, its lights dismally marooned in the fog. Georgia cleaned herself up in the ladies' room, then strolled towards the far end of the platform. A fog-signal smacked dully from somewhere out in the gloom, and there was the distant clatter of a train. Glancing about her, Georgia hurried down the ramp, slipped like a wraith across the metals to an up platform. The train rumbled in and came to a halt, standing there with that derelict and lifeless look of trains in the small hours of the morning. It was a slow to Manchester, a yawning porter told her. As well Manchester as anywhere else: she could lose herself in a city that size, get a breathing-space, put through a call to Sir John; and the E.B. would not be looking for her yet in that direction. Wearily she got into the train. Sitting there, clanking slowly through the fog, she began to feel the smart of the burns on her forearms. It reminded her that tonight had been real, not the phantasmagoria of fear and violence it seemed. She was out in the open now against her enemies, England's enemies.

Georgia believed she was safe for the present, but it would never do to relax her vigilance. Alone in the compartment, she decided to keep awake by reading through Plan A and making a mental *précis* of it which she could transmit to Sir John Strangeways over the phone. She took the papers out of her dress and began to read. Her sensibilities dulled by exhaustion, she could feel no triumph in having the E.B.'s secret here under her hands as well as Chilton Canteloe's Plan B in her head. She might have been perusing the prospectus of a respectable company for all the thrill it gave her. Indeed, with its cold, impersonal setting-out of detail, its translation of flesh-and-blood hopes, greed, fears, idealism into an inhuman document, the plan did read rather like a company-prospectus.

At last the train drew into Manchester. Georgia had to pay for her ticket at the barrier. It reminded her how fallible she was. She ought to have got a ticket at the other end, as well as the one for London: this transaction would draw attention to her, and when the E.B. had discovered she was not on the London train, they would naturally start inquiries about other trains which had left Nottingham early this morning.

She was too tired to worry much about it now. Carrying the suitcase into the station hotel, she booked a room under the name of Anita Clay. Luckily the suitcase was a fitted one, heavy enough for the page who took it from her not to suspect that "Anita Clay" had no personal belongings in it at all. The initials stamped on it, C.A.C.—Chilton Anstruther Canteloe—were near enough the initials of Anita Clay to rouse no comment, she hoped.

Now that she was temporarily in refuge, the reaction of the night set in. The hotel's solid furniture swam before her eyes as if it were built of swirling fog: her whole body ached, and her feet felt like feather-stuffed bolsters. In the bedroom at last, the door locked, the betraying, empty suitcase tucked away under the bed, she reached out her hand for the telephone. Had she put through the long-distance call to Sir John at this moment, she might have been saved a great deal of trouble. But fatally she thought, it'll be a long conversation, I might as well do it in comfort; and undressed and washed, and got into bed in her underclothes. That nicely-sprung bed, the soft pillows, were too much for her. As her hand reached out for the telephone again, her eyelids would hold up no longer and sleep blacked out everything.

It was after midday when Georgia woke. Refreshed by sleep, she came awake with all her senses about her. She rang down for coffee, toast and the first edition of the evening papers. Yes, as she had expected, it was all there. Historic Mansion Gutted. Popular Millionaire Injured Fighting Flames. Injured. Only injured. That is bad. We have scotched the snake, not killed it. I'm getting soft. I ought to have finished him last night. I ought—oh, God, I ought to have rung up Uncle John. With Chilton still alive, and his plans stolen, not one of us is safe. But I was so sleepy. No excuses, my girl. You must make the best of it and get in touch with Uncle John now, before it's too late.

But it was too late. As she put the newspaper aside, her eye lit on another column. It reported that, walking to his office in Scotland Yard this morning, Sir John Strangeways, head of C. Department, had been knocked down by a car and was now in a critical condition. The car had not stopped. The police, however, were confident, etc.

Like hell the car didn't stop, she thought. I should have risked taking that train to London. I was thinking so hard about how to save my own skin, and now Uncle John . . . Oh, damn them all!

Georgia was so fond of Nigel's uncle, so horrified by the knowledge that she might have saved him from this lightning counter-stroke of the E.B. that she did not realize for a moment how much her own position was altered for the worse. Even supposing Sir John recovered, he would be *hors-de-combat* for at least a week, she imagined. And, during that time, what should she do? Sir John had given her strict orders that, when she obtained any really vital information, she must convey it directly to him. She had no idea, so wide were the ramifications of the E.B. by now, which of his subordinates could be trusted: neither could she rely upon any protection from him for the present. She could not even walk into the nearest police-station and hand over the responsibility to them, for—though the majority of the police were no doubt still loyal—she could not be sure of any individual one.

"Georgia, my lass," she murmured to herself, sipping her luke-warm coffee, "you're on the run. They've got you going and coming. The fun is only just beginning."

The thought filled her with an absurd exhilaration. She'd got out of tight places before, and she might do it again if the luck ran her way.

Chapter 16

The Episode of the Father Christmases

Georgia's first impulse was to ring up Nigel at Oxford and enlist his help. She desperately wanted him, even if it was only to hear the comfort of his voice for a few minutes. But she realized this would never do. In the first place, he had probably left Oxford to be with his uncle. Besides, it would only be bringing him into the danger-zone: whoever she attempted to communicate with might be marked down by the E.B. and attacked with the same ruthlessness that had been used on Sir John. She was like a person with a contagious disease: she must isolate herself from those she loved or they too would be struck down.

Alison Grove was another matter. Alison had been in this from the start, and she should be able to put her in touch with those who were carrying on Sir John Strangeways' work. Heartened by the thought of speaking with her friend, Georgia dressed and went to the hotel dining-room for lunch. She did not suppose that the E.B. could have caught up with her yet, but for all that it might be safer not to ring up Alison from the hotel. So after lunch, she strolled out into the station and entered a public call-box. Alison, fortunately, was at her flat when the call went through.

"Hello, Alison? This is Georgia."

"Hell*o!* I see you've been indulging in arson, ducky."

"I'd have indulged in murder too if I'd had the sense—and a bit more time. Listen, darling, please don't chatter, we'll all have to move fast now. I've got hold of the doings. C.C. and the whole E.B. are out after me. You realize it was they who did that to Uncle John? How is he?"

"As well as you could expect. They say he has a fifty-fifty chance. Georgia, for heaven's sake, did you say you'd got hold of the——?"

"Yes. There are two plans. One's on paper and the other's in my head. I haven't time to explain. What's my next move?"

"Where are you? No! Wait a minute. You remember the Puce Goat?"

"Yes. But what on earth—?" The Puce Goat was the long-suffering mistress who, some twenty years ago, had taught them both Latin—so called because of her complexion and incipient beard. It was soon explained. Alison broke into a rattle of dog-Latin.

"Ubi es nunc, amice?"

"In urbe castra hominis." Georgia hoped this would convey Manchester.

"In *what?* Oh, I get you. *Mane ubi es. Curabo auxilium mittendum.*"

All very well to tell her to stay where she was, thought Georgia: the E.B. might find her before Alison's promised help arrived. She told Alison, in halting Latin, that—if she had to move away from here—she would try and get to Oxford.

"Habesne satis pecunioe?"

Georgia was reminded that she had very little money left. It was arranged that her friend should wire an order for £50, which she could pick up at the Manchester branch of her bank. They arranged a rendezvous in Manchester where Georgia could meet the escort Alison would be sending. Georgia had memorized the names of the E.B. organizers and the various centres of the conspiracy in England: she was about to pass these on to Alison when her eyes, straying through the glass partition of the telephone booth, lighted on David Renton.

Impeccably dressed in black overcoat and pin-stripe trousers, his white, fleshy face bland under the bowler-hat, Chilton Canteloe's secretary was earnestly conversing with the ticket-collector at the barrier. He looked the picture of respectability. So did the two young men in plus-fours and pork-pie hats lounging at the cigarette kiosk, to whom Renton, turning away now from the barrier, made an unobtrusive sign.

"Ring off, Alison. Some of the boys have arrived," said Georgia, and ducked down out of their sight behind the wooden door.

She thanked her stars she had brought the E.B. papers with her. There could be no going back to the hotel now. Renton would search there first, and that infernal suitcase would tell him all he needed to know. Georgia had to decide quickly between leaving Manchester at once with the little money she had, or staying till the bank opened again tomorrow morning. To stay was dangerous; but, without money, she would be helpless. It was not simply a matter of buying a ticket to Oxford. She must have some disguise if she hoped to get there safely. Slipping out of the telephone booth, she jumped into a taxi and told the man to drive her to a small hotel in one of the suburbs. On the way she stopped and bought a cheap suitcase, a pair of pyjamas and a few necessaries. Her money now, when she had paid her bill for the night, would be nearly exhausted.

She spent the evening making a *précis* of Plan A and writing an account of Plan B. She would keep the original plan in her bag, so that, if the E.B. got her, they would have no difficulty in finding it. The copy and Plan B she decided to conceal on her own person: she might, after all, be able to escape from them again, though they would not be likely to leave loopholes. The problem of disposing of the copy now arose. It was all very well for people in books to talk so gaily about concealing papers on one's person. When the papers were as bulky as Plan A, even in *précis*, they were not so easily disposed of. Georgia could not sew them inside the lining of her fur coat, for instance, since she intended to disguise herself in men's clothing. After some thought she unpicked her corselette belt, slipped the sheets of paper between its satin panel and the lining, and sewed it up again. Her last action was to crop short her hair in readiness for tomorrow's change of clothing.

The next morning she paid her bill, packed her suitcase, took a taxi to the central branch of the bank, and received the money Alison had wired. She intended after this to find some small second-hand clothes shop where she could buy a man's rig-out with the least danger of the purchase being traced to her. But no sooner had she stepped outside the bank than she perceived, on the opposite side of the road, one of the young men who had been with David Renton yesterday at the station. He glanced at her, deliberately folded up the paper he had been affecting to read, and waved it at someone further down the street.

The E.B. certainly waste no time, she thought. This is where I get off. But surely they won't try to kidnap me here, in the middle of the shopping-centre, among these crowds? Let's hope they're all men—the ones who are shadowing me now: they'll need to be made of stern stuff if they're going to follow me in here. And she turned in at the door of a huge department store, already beginning to fill up with women shoppers.

The warm, scented air was a contrast with bleak Manchester outside. These hard-headed Mancunian housewives, obeying the advertisements which told them to Do Your Christmas Shopping Early, would have scoffed at the idea that every swing-door of the great building was now watched by a man who would stick at nothing to lay his hands on the small, fur-coated, Eton-cropped woman wandering dreamily from department to department. Georgia guessed they were there, though. She had only darted in here to give herself time to think, to invent a new plan, and because it was safer here than out in a street where cars could knock down pedestrians—as Uncle John had been knocked down—and drive on.

She thought of entering the men's department, buying suit, hat and overcoat, and changing somewhere on the premises. But this idea was soon rejected. Even if she were sufficiently well disguised to get past the watchers at the doors, her purchases could be too quickly traced and it would put them on her track again.

That shop-walker's eyes seemed to be fixed on her rather curiously, as she lingered among the Ladies' Underwear. She became aware of the suitcase in her hand. It'd be darned funny if I was hauled up on suspicion of shop-lifting, she thought. It's darned funny how guilty the very idea makes me feel—considering I've already let myself in for charges of arson, attempted murder of a millionaire, and theft of a millionaire's Rolls-Royce, to say nothing of that unpaid bill at the station hotel. Georgia, you're in a spot.

She walked downstairs to the ladies' room and left her suitcase there. At the far end of the room was a door marked "Staff Only." It occurred to her that here might be an exit left unguarded by the E.B. men, and she determined to prospect it. Waiting till she was unobserved, she slipped through the door into a long passage. Like the behind-the-scenes of many other imposing façades, of theatres, restaurants or big shops, the passage was mean and ill-lighted. Georgia went down it till she heard voices in front of her. Employes, no doubt. She must pretend she'd lost herself, and ask them to show her the way out. She turned the corner, to be confronted by no indignant supervisor or giggling employés. Sitting on a bench, desultorily chatting, smoking cigarette stubs and spitting on the stone floor, were half a dozen Father Christmases.

Georgia stopped dead in amazement. My recent experiences must have turned my brain. But no, there they are—one, two, three, four, five, six Father Christmases. Or should one say "Fathers Christmas"?

Then she saw the sandwich-boards piled up in a corner. Of course: it was a poster-parade. Do Your Christmas Shopping Early. Come To Hallam and Appleby's For Your Yule-Tide Gifts. Oh glory! thought Georgia; thank you, Santa Claus, for your nice present: the very thing I wanted. Now I can offer the E.B. the compliments of the season.

She picked out a man who seemed nearest to her own size, and led him round the angle of the passage. The other five Father Christmases paid no attention at all, as if ladies in expensive fur coats were quite the normal thing in this lobby. Maybe they hadn't even seen her. Maybe their eyes were still fixed on the gutter trailing beneath their broken shoes, on the sandwich-boarded back of the man in front.

"Here, Dad," said Georgia. "Be a sport. I want to borrow your robe and that beard."

The man unhooked his beard with great deliberation, revealing a pug-nosed, withered, sardonic old face.

"What's the idea, Mrs.?"

"It's a bet. A friend of mine bet me I wouldn't walk in the sandwich-board parade."

"A bit of fun, eh? You mean, you're out for a bit of fun, like?"

"That's it. I'll pay for it."

"I thought, when you asked me, you wur one of them Mass Observers they writes about in papers."

"No. I'm just one of the mass-observed. Particularly so at the moment. What do they give you a day for this job?"

"Half a crown, Mrs., and a snap at midday. You should see it. What they sweep oop from floor. Potage Maisong. And a ruddy sight more maisong than potage about it."

"I'll give you a quid for the loan of that fancy-dress for an hour. Change places with you, see?"

"Betcher life you will—and get me the sack too. I'll 'ave nowt to do with it, Mrs."

"You'll not get the sack. You hang about outside here. No, you'd better follow the parade. How far do they walk?"

"As far as the Green Man, if we gets a chance. But I'm having nowt to do with it."

"Well, you can keep up with us that far, walk along the pavement behind us to make sure I don't run off with your robe. And when we get there, we'll slip out of sight a moment and change clothes again."

"Seems to me you're daft, Mrs. Just like our Emmie. Always oop to soom daft notion." The old man stared at her lugubriously. Then his wizened face suddenly underwent a convulsion and rearranged itself into a sly smile. "Tickle our Mum, this would," he chuckled. "Aye, it would and all. Make it two quid."

"You're a sport, Dad."

Georgia handed him the money. She put on the red, white-fur-trimmed robe over her own coat, and adjusted the hood. It came down to her feet, made her look bulky and shapeless, but no harm in that. The old man punctiliously wiped the false beard on his sleeve before passing it to her. Spasms of chuckling shook him at intervals. Georgia tucked her bag inside the robe: it should be held up all right by the girdle, and its shape concealed under the sandwich-board.

"Am I quite covered up now? No skirt showing?"

"That's right, Mrs. Wouldn't know you apart from myself. It's a knockout. Out you go, now. They're just off."

Georgia went into the lobby and hoisted the sandwich-boards over her shoulders. The procession moved apathetically through the door, along a cobbled passage with grimy buildings towering on either side, and shambled into the main street—as dispirited-looking a set of Santa Clauses as any one could hope to see. They certainly roused no interest in the pair of loafers who had been standing outside this alley for the last twenty-five minutes, on the look-out for a small, dark, hatless lady in a fur coat.

Turning left, the procession passed in front of the great display-windows of Hallam and Appleby's. Georgia could see at a glance that the store was in a state of siege: near every entrance a cluster of men had gathered: the E.B. was taking no chances. Her red sleeve, trimmed with fur that long usage had turned from snow- to slush-colour, brushed against the young man in the pork-pie hat and ginger moustache. She heard him mutter to one of his associates, "We've got her cold now."

The words brought a kind of delayed claustrophobia over Georgia. While she had been inside the shop, she was too busy to think of anything except how she could get out. Now she saw herself in there, like a rabbit in a warren, every hole watched by the implacable hunters. Shambling along in the gutter, she kept her head bent; but her eyes glanced sideways, registering the appearance of the E.B. agents. She would be able to recognize them again. A certain purposeful, attentive air distinguished them from the crowds that idled restlessly about the plate-glass windows.

The five Father Christmases walked slowly on, oblivious alike of the children who gaped at them and the man-hunt that was taking place under their noses. Georgia followed them, glad she had kept on her fur-coat beneath the robe, for the leather straps of the sandwich-boards were already biting into her shoulders. They were far down the street now; out of the danger-zone, she thought. Her heart sighed with relief, and she began to plan the next move. The war of attrition was over. A period of mobile warfare had begun. Her safety depended on moving fast and keeping moving. Already she chafed at the slouching, tortoise-gait of the sandwichmen. Even a car drawn up by the kerb, round which the procession had to deviate, seemed a delaying obstacle. She walked past it, brushed against the front mudguard, fell into place again along the gutter. As she did so, the high heel of her left shoe caught in a grating and made her stumble badly. She recovered herself, moved on, unaware that a man had noticed the little accident and slipped out of the passenger's seat of the car.

It was one of the E.B. cars, its nose pointing away from the department store, ready to begin the chase in the event of Georgia getting through the cordon and trying to escape by taxi. The driver started his engine, kept it ticking over while his companion caught up with the tail of the sandwich-board procession.

Georgia knew nothing of this till, half a minute later, a man passed her, walking rapidly along the pavement edge, transferring cigarettes from a Player's carton to his silver case. When he was a couple of yards ahead of her, he fumbled with the case and several cigarettes fell into the gutter. The man bent down to retrieve them. It was all over in a few seconds. She perceived the tensing of his figure as he caught sight, bending down, of the high-heeled shoes that were the only part of her not disguised by the Father Christmas dress.

Damn, damn, damn! My Achilles heel. Why did it have to trip me up just then? Now I'm back at the start again. Worse, for they would scarcely have dared to start anything in the shop; but out here, out in the open . . .

She heard the car creeping up behind her, imagined the stunning impact, the hands lifting her solicitously into the car, the car driving away—but not to hospital. Why they did not employ upon her the same methods that had been used against Sir John, she never knew. Perhaps they wanted to make sure of searching her, without interference at the start. Policemen have a way of cropping up out of the ground as soon as an accident has happened.

At any rate, nothing happened for a while. The car had turned and gone back towards the shopping centre, the cigarette-dropping man strolled along a little distance behind the Father Christmases. They reached the Green Man. With a hurried glance round, the leader popped into the pub, followed by the others. Georgia knew her only hope now was to stick close to them: the car would be bringing up more of the E.B. agents and the pub would be surrounded.

The Father Christmases were having a quick one: a very quick one—already they were wiping their snowy moustaches and making for the door again. Through the glass partition between public bar and smoking-room, the old man whose clothes Georgia had borrowed was gesticulating to her violently but in vain. Soundless oaths took shape on that wizened old face behind the glass. Georgia pretended not to notice him, and followed the procession out into the street.

The walk back to the department store was her worst ordeal. It seemed as if their leader wished to display the posters through every street in Manchester before they returned. Georgia had managed to slip into a middle place in the parade when they left the pub, so that there was less danger of her being cut off: but every passer-by now looked like an enemy, and at any moment, in whatever unexpected form, the attack might take place.

If only they could get back safely to the store! A plan was forming in her head—a desperate last resort, but now her only hope. At last they approached the alley beside Hallam and Appleby's. Here, in this narrow, blind passage, she would be most vulnerable. Only five old men to protect her, and they without a glimmering of an idea that any protection would be needed. She could imagine the alley blocked at either end, the gleam of weapons, the deliberate hustling, the senile stupor of the Father Christmases. No, she was not going into that alley, not at any price.

As they passed the door of the toy department, Georgia suddenly unhitched her sandwich-boards, swung them hard against the shins of a man who tried to intercept her, dropped them, and whipped in through the door before either commissionaire or E.B. men could lay a finger on her. A shop-walker seized her arm and muttered angrily, his face still wreathed in an obequious smile for the benefit of the customers, "Here, you. What the hell are you doing in here? Get back to—no, modom, leather fancies first floor up—I'll see you're fired for this, you old fool."

"Take your hands off me, you wax dummy," Georgia replied gruffly, "or I'll give you such a kick in the pants it'll send your spine out through the top of your head—if you have a spine, you invertebrate son of a misbegotten jellyfish."

The shop-walker's hand fell nervelessly from her arm. His mouth gobbled, and his eyes bulged after this outrageous Father Christmas who now proceeded leisurely through the toy department, pausing occasionally to pat a child on the head. "Did you hear what he said to me?" the shop-walker exclaimed when he had found his voice. "That's the thanks we get for picking an unemployed man off the street and giving him work. By gum, he'll find he can't treat Hallam and Appleby's like that. I'll—I'll report him to the manager."

"Report whom," said an assistant sweetly. "There's half a dozen of those Father Christmases. You'll have to use a divining-rod, Mr. Prendergast."

"None of your sauce, my girl. Ah t'cha."

Meanwhile Georgia had made her way into the passage that led to the staff-lobby. She took off her disguise, rolled it up, and flung it round the corner amongst the Father Christmases. Then, returning through the ladies' room, she began to perambulate slowly around the crowded departments again. The house-detective, who was shortly summoned to keep an eye on her, decided she was the most blatant and unskilful shoplifter he had ever seen. Must be one of them kleptomaniacs, he said to himself as she stowed away two pairs of silk stockings, a bottle of expensive scent and a shopping-diary.

Chapter 17

The Episode of the Pantechnicon's Progress

The house-detective placed his hand under Georgia's elbow. "The manager would like a word with you, madam," he said.

"The manager? I don't understand. Why, what——?"

"He would wish you to explain the presence of certain articles in your bag." The house-detective appeared to speak more in sorrow than in anger. He was constantly tripping up these loopy dames who couldn't keep their fingers off Hallam and Appleby's stuff. All in the day's work. You gave 'em a fright and pushed 'em out again: prosecutions didn't do the House any good. He was quite used, also, to the icy but brittle hauteur with which this woman replied:

"I'm afraid I don't understand you. Please leave go of my elbow. It's outrageous. Are you suggesting——?"

"Better wash the dirty linen in private, madam," he said paternally, indicating with a slight movement of the head the curious glances which other shoppers were beginning to give her. "This way, please." She followed him like a lamb. They always did. Nothing these respectable dames dreaded so much as a scene. A queer go, they were and all: afterwards, some of them even tipped him for dealing with their little mistakes so tactfully.

Outside the manager's door Georgia, still playing her part, took out her compact and mirror and touched herself up a bit. All went well so far. The manager would turn her over to the police. Unless she struck unlucky, and these particular officers were in the pay of the E.B., she could count on a safe night in the cells, time to think out her next move. That risk had to be taken, for it would be sudden death to set a foot outside this shop now without an escort.

The manager, sitting behind his desk as they entered, gave her a surprise. She had expected some middle-aged, pasty, self-important, wing-collared individual. Mr. Dickon, however, turned out to be quite young, dressed in a stylish tweed-suit which, with his horn-rimmed glasses and bushy moustache, gave him more the appearance of a successful author.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said. "Mrs. er——?"

"Mrs. Smith. Mrs. *Percy* Smith. I demand to know by what right——?"

"Would you mind opening your bag?" asked the young man, his tone an odd blend of diffidence, authority, and faintly bored amusement. Before she could reply, the house-detective had lifted the bag neatly off her lap and laid out the stolen articles on the desk. Then he returned it to her, the papers of Plan A rustling inside.

"You know, this is very naughty of you, Mrs. Smith—Mrs. *Percy* Smith."

Georgia buried her head in her hands and broke down—convincingly, she hoped. She heard the manager say, not unkindly, yet in a detached voice:

"Now you mustn't distress yourself. It was just a little mistake. Forget all about it. Hallam and Appleby's never prosecute first offenders."

Georgia sat up, gazing at him in consternation. Her whole scheme lay in ruins. He was not calling in the police: she still had to get away from this wretched shop of his unaided. She tried to stammer out thanks, her heart raging with disappointment. Mr. Dickon motioned the detective out of the room. Then he tilted his chair back at a dangerous angle, smiled at Georgia quizzically, and said:

"And now, Mrs. Strangeways, what can I do for you?"

Georgia had had quite a few shocks during the last forty-eight hours, but none that disconcerted her more than this. She stared at the young manager blankly.

"I heard you lecturing at the Travellers' Club a couple of years ago," he explained. "I used to do a bit myself—went on one of the Oxford University expeditions, to the Antarctic."

"But——"

"I know enough about you, Mrs. Stangeways, to be quite sure that—if you really wanted to pinch things out of this place—you'd have no difficulty in getting away with it. So, you see, I asked myself, why does the astute Mrs. Strangeways allow herself to be caught red-handed? And answer came there none. Perhaps you'll elucidate?"

Georgia, silent for a little, looked Mr. Dickon over. Everything now depended on her faculty, trained in strange places among strangers, for summing up character at a glance. If he were all right, as he looked, he could be her salvation: if, on the other hand, he was a member of the E.B., she might as well pack up straight away. The fact that, though she had been caught out shop-lifting, he was for letting her go scot-free, told against him. But there was a candour, a humorousness in his eyes which persuaded her to trust him. She gestured towards the window of his office.

"That looks out on the front of the building, doesn't it? Just go over and glance down. See those groups of men hanging about by the entrances?"

"M'm!"

"They're there to get hold of me. I'm working for the Special Branch—counter-espionage. It's vital that I get to—get away from here this afternoon. This is something big, Mr. Dickon. So big that I daren't tell you more. I may have been mistaken in telling you so much, and in this game one isn't allowed to make more than one mistake. You follow?"

"What about the police?"

"They must not be brought into it."

"I see."

Mr. Dickon drew some geometrical diagrams on his blotter. He had that astonishing faculty for not showing astonishment, which Oxford imparts to her sons. Georgia's heart warmed to him: he was a traveller too; the most bizarre phenomena would be greeted by him with just that faint lifting of the eyebrows, that carefully concealed exultation. He asked for no explanations, intent upon the matter in hand.

"Where—roughly where do you want to get to? London?" he said at last.

"Farther west, shall we say?"

Georgia grinned back at him. Mr. Dickon touched a button and spoke into the house-telephone.

"Furnishing department? What vans have we going out this afternoon? . . . Yes . . . No, he'll have to start earlier. Make it three o'clock. Who's the foreman? . . . Send him and the driver up here in five minutes." Mr. Dickon looked up at her. "How much can I tell them?"

"Are they absolutely trustworthy?"

"Yes. They're staunch Trades Unionists." His eyes studied her shrewdly. "I imagine that's the type you'd feel safest with in—er—the present circumstances."

"Mr. Dickon, I feel you perhaps suspect more than is healthy for you."

"What Manchester suspects today, madam, England will suspect tomorrow. By Jove, I wish I could come with you," he exclaimed boyishly. Then, the efficient manager again, he said, "We'd better have a diversion as well. Let me see . . . Are these people out to shoot at sight?"

"No. Kidnapping's what they're after."

The efficient Mr. Dickon pressed another button. "Tell Miss Jones I want to speak to her in quarter of an hour's time."

In a dream Georgia watched him organize the detail of her escape. She was to travel in the pantechnicon, scheduled to leave for Plymouth this afternoon. Trousers, coat, shoes, white overalls, cloth cap appeared as if by magic, and she retired into the manager's wash-place to put them on. He opened the window, rubbed his hands on the sill outside, and artistically smeared Manchester grime over her face, neck and hands. "We supply all your needs," he said, fastening a black, toothbrush moustache on her upper lip with spirit gum. He was enjoying it all enormously in his quiet way. The driver and foreman, sworn to secrecy, had already been told what they must do.

Miss Jones, a head clerk in the accountancy department, a woman of Georgia's height and build, was to supply the diversion. Thirty seconds before the lorry left the yard, she would hurry out of a shop door dressed in a fur coat similar to Georgia's and a hat with an eye-veil. The E.B. watchers would intercept her, and shortly discover their mistake: but their attention would have been distracted for a minute from the outgoing van. Miss Jones, a leading light in amateur theatricals, could be relied on to make the most of the episode.

"And now," said Mr. Dickon, "I'll have lunch sent up. Just pop into the other room till they've brought it. You'll need a hearty meal if you're going to help load furniture. Let's see, now." He became absorbed in organizing the menu.

"Darling Mr. Dickon, I'll really have to take you with me on an expedition some day. What a comfort you'd be."

"That's a bargain . . ."

At four o'clock Georgia was sitting between driver and foreman in the wide cab of the pantechnicon. They were now twenty miles out of Manchester, roaring steadily south into the gathering darkness. Georgia had the papers of Plan A tucked away in a wallet in her coat pocket, and in the pocket of her baize apron lay a revolver supplied by the inexhaustible Mr. Dickon. She was feeling—of all unlikely emotions at this juncture—a dull boredom. The progress of a pantechnicon does not conduce to any lively excitement, for one thing: and besides, Georgia was no soccer enthusiast, and her two companions were already deeply involved in controversy about the respective merits of Manchester City and Manchester United. Statistics, reminiscences, judgments of form, dark hints of the machinations of managers, less guarded comments on the physical infirmities of referees, beat to and fro about the cab like bats' wings in a dark cave. Driver and foreman had replayed every move of the last three matches won by their respective teams when a sound of an electric horn stabbed the night and a mobile policeman, swerving past the pantechnicon, halted his motor-bike thirty yards ahead and raised his hand for them to stop.

Georgia was already slumped back in her seat, feigning sleep. She heard the driver slide back the side window and the policeman speaking through it. The police were stopping all cars and lorries, he said: they were looking for a woman, last seen in Manchester, wanted on a charge of car-stealing. Georgia's hand felt for the revolver in her pocket. She hoped she would not have to use it.

"Got no girls with us on this trip—worse luck," said the driver.

"My orders are to search the van."

"Search away, cock, I'm not stopping you. But you'll have to sign my road-book to show I've been delayed. I'm running to schedule."

"None of your lip, my lad. Come on, open up."

"You sign my road-book, cock, or I'm not opening this van. We haven't got all night to chat with fancy coppers on stink-bang machines."

After some blustering, the policeman signed. Then he stood his motor-bike in the road behind the pantechnicon so that its headlight shone into the interior which, with a good deal of passive obstruction from the growling foreman, he proceeded to search thoroughly. Georgia heard him stumbling about amongst the furniture, and suggestions from the foreman that he might care to unload this wardrobe and take it home with him to examine at leisure.

"What say we lock oop t'bleeder inside and take him along with us?" the driver whispered to her.

"Better not, Joe. I don't want to get you into more trouble than I can help." Later, Georgia was to regret she had not accepted the driver's suggestion. At last the policeman declared himself satisfied. Poking his head into the cabin, he told the driver he could get on with it.

"What about your mate? He seen anything? Sleeping pretty sound, isn't he?"

"So'd you be, if you ever did any work."

"Wake him up," ordered the policeman brusquely.

"Here, cock, have a heart."

"Wake him up, I tell you."

"Ruddy pocket Hitler! Ain't this a free country? Can't even take a nap without you've got a licence from police," exclaimed the driver truculently. Georgia pressed her foot gently against his. He took the cue.

"Very well," he said, shaking her shoulder. "Come on, young Albert, wake oop."

Georgia answered the policeman's questions in a husky voice, sneezing frequently and wiping her nose with her sleeve. The man appeared satisfied, and shortly roared away in front of them on his motor-bike.

"Has ter stolen a car really, Miss?" asked the foreman when they were on their way again.

"As a matter of fact I did. A Rolls-Royce."

"Well, fancy that now. To my mind, we ought to have knocked that copper on t'head."

"I'm not sure you're not right. I'm afraid we'll hear more of him tonight."

They did. Their route lay through Stoke and Stafford towards Birmingham. Mr. Dickon had decided on this, rather than the more westerly road by Shrewsbury, because there was more traffic on it and therefore less danger of interference. As they hummed on through the towns of the Potteries, the dark sky lit up intermittently with furnace-flares. Georgia pondered the recent episode. The policeman had evidently been an E.B. agent. His searching of the van suggested that perhaps Mr. Dickon had over-reached himself. When Miss Jones made her diversion, and the E.B. discovered she was not the woman they were after, they might well suspect the pantechnicon which had drawn out of Hallam and Appleby's yard just then.

They would assume she had contrived to hide herself somehow amid the furniture. But the mobile policeman, having found nobody there, had naturally become inquisitive about the third occupant of the driver's cab. She hoped, but without much conviction, that her husky voice had taken him in. The fact that he pursued the matter no further at the moment was not necessarily reassurring: he could not cut up rough when there were those two stalwarts in the cab to support her. But his search had held up the pantechnicon long enough for more thorough preparations to be made somewhere on the road ahead.

"Yes," said Georgia, "I think they'll try a holdup further along."

"Let 'em try," said the driver with relish. "We'll boomp 'em off t'road. They'll not stop this van, without they dig a hole in front."

After a while Georgia suggested they might turn off the main road: even the E.B. would scarcely dig pits in it, but they could strew nails on the surface. The driver nodded towards his reflecting-mirror. "No use doing that, Miss. We're being followed now. See those lights? I looked back at the curve just now. It's a small van. It could easily pass us if they wanted to. Reckon they're not starting owt yet. They're following oop to make sure you don't pop out of my van."

It was now seven o'clock, and in an hour's time they should have reached the outskirts of Birmingham. Georgia thought that, if she were to jump out of the pantechnicon somewhere in the city, the pursuers in the van would follow her, and she might slip them and rejoin the pantechnicon at a pre-arranged spot, thus throwing them off the scent. But she discarded the plan as quickly as she had made it. The risk of being cut off from her present comrades was too great. Instead, when they had reached the city, she told Joe to drive through the centre instead of taking the bypass. He navigated the one-way-street maze of Birmingham with all the skill of a veteran skipper sailing his ship amidst an archipelago. The following van was following no longer. They had shaken it off.

Their joy was short-lived, however. Emerging on to the Worcester road, on the far side of the city, they soon found the headlights had picked them up again. The van had come straight through on the bypass, or else another one had been waiting here to intercept them. There was nothing for it but to go on, and on they went along the broad, sweeping road through Warwickshire, drinking the coffee and eating the sandwiches which the provident Mr. Dickon had supplied so that they need not stop at any of the pull-ins for lorries.

Georgia was thinking how odd it was that the E.B. should content themselves with this waiting rôle, wondering what the object of these tactics might be, when the pantechnicon rounded a corner, entered a narrower stretch of road, and at that instant they saw a car drawn up across the road right in their path.

Joe had been driving fast and now he stamped the accelerator down to the floor. Whistling through his teeth, he drove the pantechnicon hard at the bonnet of the obstructing car, his own wheels bumping on the verge. "Duck!" cried Georgia, "they'll shoot!" Their huge conveyance struck the car, flipped it aside like a cigarette-card. Faces had appeared in the stream of the headlights, were tossed, bobbed away behind them to a rattle of shots, as if they had been drowning faces swept past into a liner's wake.

"Are we all here still?" asked Joe, chuckling. "Eh but that was a warm bit of work."

"That's right," said the foreman stolidly. "Now as I was saying, ever since the City signed on Sproston at fullback——"

"Just a minute, boys, before you return to the business of the evening," Georgia interrupted. "I think it's time we got off the main road. We can't go on ramming obstructions all the night without damaging this van. Can you find your way along secondary roads, Joe?"

"Can I find the mouth of a bottle of beer, Miss! But what about that van behind? It's still following us."

"I'll settle the van. I'll make 'em wish they had their feet up by the fireside at home. When you're round the next corner, brake hard: but don't stop; slow down, then speed up again."

Georgia, who now felt altogether in her element, opened the cab door, scrambled out over the bonnet and hoisted herself on to the roof. As they rounded the bend, she crawled along the roof to the back of the pantechnicon. She felt it checking under the brakes. The pursuing van swung into sight, overhauling them rapidly. It was less than thirty yards away. Georgia levelled her revolver and aimed at its headlights. It took five shots to knock them both out. Not so bad, she thought, considering I'm a bit out of practice and the way this pantechnicon's swaying. She fired the last shot deliberately into the windscreen of the yawing van, which at once slewed off the road and cocked itself up over the bank.

Feeling rather proud of herself, Georgia scrambled back into the cab. Her companions winked at her solemnly, in unison.

"Has ter been shooting goon?" inquired the foreman.

"Yes, I shot out their headlights. They're ditched."

"Ah. I thought I aird soomething," the foreman commented, sucking his teeth. "Now, as I was telling yer, Joe: Sproston brings him down in t'penalty area, and——"

"If it's O.K. by you, boys," said Georgia humbly, "we'll cut off cross-country now. Wake me up when you've won Coop-Final."

Many sleepy villages, far off the beaten track, heard the thundering vibration of the pantechnicon that December night. To Georgia, dozing in the cab, the drive had all the inconsequence of a dream. Trees, steeples, petrol-pumps, sign-posts, owls, rabbits were picked out by the headlights and streamed continuously through her consciousness. Every hour with forty horse-power I'm getting nearer to Nigel. So what does referee do then, the great gorm? You wanted an adventure, Georgia, my dear. Chilton. That charming smile, the ice-cold heart. The smiler with the knife. Where does that come? Chaucer. Good old Chaucer, he knew. Chaucer, thou shouldst be living at this hour. Chilton Canteloe. There saw I first the dark imagining of felony. Dark. Dark. Darker. . . .

"Wake up, Miss."

"What's—? Where am—where are we?"

"Evesham. Be in Gloucester soon. A chap on a motorbike stopped us just now. Lost his way, he said. We didn't like the look of him."

The pantechnicon rolled on. Be in Gloucester soon. And then only fifty miles to Oxford. But Georgia felt anxious: it was incredible that the E.B. should have let her through so easily: it was, almost, an anti-climax. No doubt, at this ticklish time, they did not want to call attention to themselves more than was necessary, but——

"Look up there!" Georgia suddenly exclaimed.

At the top of a long rise which the pantechnicon was beginning to climb, against the skyline where the glimmering road surmounted the hill crest, lay a bulk of deeper blackness. The E.B. were making no mistake this time. They had blocked the road at a place where the lorry would be crawling so slowly that it would have no impetus to break through the obstruction.

"Drive straight on," said Georgia urgently. "Tell them you dropped me off at Evesham. Good luck."

The foreman held open the cab door, and she jumped out, landing with relaxed muscles in the ditch, where she rolled safely under cover behind the screen of the pantechnicon's blazing headlights.

Chapter 18

The Episode of the Radiance Girls

Georgia's brain always seemed to work quickest in such emergencies. She knew she must get away from this place at once, find somewhere to lie low and change her disguise. But she must wait till the attention of the men in the E.B. ambush was distracted by the pantechnicon. She heard it whining up the hill in bottom gear, then a crash as it struck the obstacle, shouts, sounds of struggle. Driver and foreman were giving a good account of themselves, so that she might have a better chance of getting away. She slipped across the road, found a gate, ran across the field under cover of a hedge.

It was lucky for her that she had kept to this cover. Above the drumming of her heart, she began to hear another noise—an engine roaring. At first she thought her companions must, by some miracle, have repelled their assailants and started up the pantechnicon again. Then the whole night suddenly flowered into a livid light, in which every detail of the landscape for a mile all around could be picked out. What she had heard was the noise of an aeroplane, and it had dropped this flare to light up the scene for the E.B. men.

Georgia froze against the hedge—a pitifully inadequate protection without its summer foliage. Eyes in the aeroplane, she knew, were searching the landscape for her. She felt as big as a haystack. Before the light died out, however, she had got her bearings. In front of her lay an orchard of young trees, and a mile beyond them she had noticed—generously flood-lit by the E.B. aeroplane—a steeple. She must reach that steeple before the cordon was completed.

It was like a vast, mad game of Musical Chairs or General Post. Once inside the orchard, she sprinted from tree to tree, pausing at each, sprinting to the next, hoping not to be caught in the open by one of the flares which the aeroplane sent down at intervals. She did not know whether the men from the ambush had spread out after her, for the roar of the aeroplane drowned all sounds of pursuit. As she neared the village, she realized how lucky for her the flares had been. Not only had they shown her the steeple, but they had awoken all the dogs in the neighbourhood and set them barking. Her pursuers could not reckon on the barking to tell them in what direction she had gone.

At last she reached the church and dodged into its porch to regain her breath. Another flare illuminated the scene. A cock in the farmyard opposite, considerably rattled by this succession of false dawns, crowed peevishly. Georgia found herself giggling: poor cock, it would never quite get its nerve back again. In the light of the flare, she saw a graveyard, an iron gate, an ivy-covered house just beyond. The vicarage, no doubt. When in trouble, apply to the vicar. She went through the gate and paused for a few minutes under the shadow of the vicarage wall, her brain racing to devise a plausible story.

There were no more flares. The sound of the aeroplane died out of the sky, giving way to a well-modulated voice from a window just over her head:

"Winter lightning, my dear. A very remarkable phenomenon. Remind me to write to the *Times* about it tomorrow. Unexampled brilliance. Now I think we may go to bed again."

"But I'm sure it wasn't lightning, dear," said another voice, with a patient stubbornness that suggested the controversy had been raging for some time. "It was that aeroplane. It was trying to land, don't you see?"

"Nonsense, Aggie. There's no aerodrome round here, you know perfectly well. The phenomenon of lightning, unaccompanied by thunder, is, I grant you, at this time of year, unusual. But not unprecedented. Not, I assure you, unprecedented. I well recollect——"

"But it wasn't lightning," said Georgia, standing out from the shadow of the wall. "Honestly it wasn't. It was me. My engine failed and I had to throw out flares. I managed to get down safely in a meadow just over there."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the vicar. "An aviatrix!"

In the dark, Georgia's white overalls might well have been a flying-suit. She had removed her moustache in the church porch, and the cloth cap was now concealed under her coat. The vicar's wife, a kindly, plain woman, insisted on supporting Georgia indoors and brewing her a cup of Ovaltine, while her husband fluttered in the background, glancing at Georgia half-incredulously, half-complacently, as though she had been no less than an angel alighted out of heaven on his doorstep.

I'm sitting pretty for the moment, she thought; but, unless Joe and the foreman convince them that I dropped off at Evesham, the E.B. will go over this district with a fine-tooth comb. That story about the aeroplane has got me into the vicarage all right, but it'd be the finish of me as soon as it reached the E.B.'s ears.

Georgia decided she must tell Mrs. Fortescue something of the real story. A certain amount of resistance had to be broken down, for the Fortescues had come to this village from a large town parish, and she was up to all the tricks of professional beggars: indeed, she had become an adept at exposing people who tried to take advantage of her husband's unworldliness and generosity. At first, therefore, Mrs. Fortescue lent a by no means ready ear to Georgia's tale. But before long a gleam began to light her tired, kindly eyes: there was a romantic in her which had not been stifled by all these years of drudgery and good works. Romance, adventure had now landed out of the night on to her doorstep, disguised as a small, brown-eyed, magnetic woman in disreputable man's clothing, and Mrs. Fortescue was transfigured. She agreed to hide Georgia in the vicarage till they had worked out the best method of getting her away. In the meanwhile she would impress upon her husband the necessity of saying nothing about their midnight visitor.

"And I only hope nobody asks him," she added, smiling gently. "Poor Herbert is the most unconvincing liar I've ever known. I remember once when the bishop came to stay and our little dog ate the episcopal braces —but I mustn't waste time with that. Luckily our maid doesn't sleep in, so nobody but us could have heard you."

Georgia slept late next morning in the attic where Mrs. Fortescue had made her a bed. She slept through the arrival of two men at breakfast-time and their discomfiture by the vicar's wife. They claimed to be plain-clothes police inquiring about a young woman wanted on a charge of car-stealing and last seen in this vicinity.

"No," said Mrs. Fortescue, firmly entrenched on her doorstep, "no one came here last night, I can assure you."

"This woman might have got in while you were asleep. I suppose you have no objection to our searching the house?"

"Of course not. Provided you have a search warrant."

"Well, as a matter of fact, madam——"

"You haven't? I'm afraid, in that case——"

The men began to bluster. Mrs. Fortescue was not in the least alarmed by them, but she was on tenterhooks lest their voices should fetch her husband out from the dining-room, where he was deeply engaged with a boiled egg and the *Church Times.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "We get so many beggars and undesirable characters at the vicarage, I couldn't possibly let you in until you've established your bona fides. Good day to you."

She related the episode to Georgia when she brought up her breakfast tray. Evidently the village of Nether Cheype was in a state of siege. Not only would it be difficult for Georgia to be smuggled out, but there was great danger even in getting a message through to London or Oxford. Mrs. Fortescue dared not leave Georgia alone in the house, and at the same time she had to keep a watchful eye on her husband lest his lips should become unsealed or his conscience, already irked by the duplicity in which she had involved him, should get the better of him.

They remained silent for a while. Glancing at the paper Mrs. Fortescue had brought up, Georgia noticed a bulletin about Sir John Strangeways: he was still in a critical condition, but hopes of ultimate recovery were now entertained. Well, thank God for that, she thought, and fell to wondering about the fate of her two companions of last night. Her thoughts were interrupted at last by Mrs. Fortescue who asked, with apparent irrelevance:

"Do you know anything about eurhythmics, dear?"

"Eurhythmics? I used to do them at school. I should think my kind must be out of date by now. Why?"

"I'm just wondering if the Radiance Girls wouldn't be our solution," said Mrs. Fortescue, tapping her teeth with a pencil and frowning down at the shopping-list in her hand.

"The Radiance Girls?" asked Georgia meekly. Nothing had any power to surprise her now.

"Herbert thinks it's all rather pagan. But, as I tell him, if the morals of our village can't stand up to a few strapping young ladies in magenta knickers, they're past praying for. Besides, we get them free. And it's such a pity we don't make more use of that stage Lady Cheype presented to the village hall. Though it would be terrible if they broke it—they do jump about rather, don't they?"

Nothing to the way *you* jump about, thought Georgia. But she let Mrs. Fortescue run on. The vicar's wife was expanding almost visibly under the influence of Georgia and the extraordinary situation into which she had been plunged. Her flow of inconsequential talk made it difficult for one to remember that they were ringed round by danger and that every way out was probably blocked by desperate men, who would hardly allow even a black-beetle to leave the district without subjecting it to their scrutiny.

Mrs. Fortescue might try one's patience with her amiable ramblings, but she certainly got somewhere in the end. Georgia realized that, for the second time in two days, her safety was being catered for by a born organizer. Mrs. Fortescue's plan was that Georgia should change places with one of the Radiance Girls when they visited Nether Cheype tomorrow night to give an exhibition of eurhythmics—or, as the leader of the Sisterhood of Radiance preferred to term it, "Psycho-physical Irradiation." The Sisterhood, which throve in places where there was a superfluity of women with more time than sex-appeal on their hands, had a centre in Cheltenham whence they sent out parties round the countryside to propagate their particular blend of theosophy and physical jerks. They would be arriving at Nether Cheype in a small private bus and departing as soon as their show had finished.

Manifesting the wisdom of the serpent, Mrs. Fortescue informed Georgia that the Sisterhood laid great importance upon the mystical number, seven: they always performed in teams of seven, led by the indefatigable Miss Lobelia Agg-Thoresby. What could be simpler than for one of the Radiance Girls to become indisposed on arriving at the vicarage, and for Georgia to volunteer to make up the mystical number? Miss Agg-Thoresby, the vicar's wife opined, would stretch a point over Georgia's doubtless not altogether satisfactory aura if thereby she could be assured of keeping the seven intact.

The idea of eluding the E.B., disguised as a ray of sunshine, tickled Georgia's fancy immensely. She feared at first that Mrs. Fortescue intended to poison one of the Radiance Girls in order to make a gap for herself: but Mrs. Fortescue assured her that she knew personally one of the visiting team, a woman not too dissimilar to Georgia in build and appearance, and could work the transposition quite easily. The main difficulty would be to keep this girl tucked out of sight till Georgia had got well away from Nether Cheype.

For the next thirty hours or so, Georgia had to possess her soul in patience. She dared not leave the attic or even move about in it much during the daytime, let she should betray her presence to the Fortescues' maid. The vicar made his sole appearance on the Thursday afternoon, bringing her a book of sermons, a bound volume of *Punch* and a brochure of his own authorship on the antiquities of Tewkesbury Abbey. At intervals Mrs. Fortescue darted in with food and gossip: there was plenty of gossip in the village just now, what with last night's aeroplane, the collision between a car and a pantechnicon on Rootley Hill, and the presence of so many inquisitive strangers in the district.

At last Friday night came, and the Radiance Girls with it. Their leader, Lobelia Agg-Thoresby, was the flattest woman Georgia had ever seen: "willowy" was the word Lobelia applied to herself; Georgia, regarding the flat figure in its drooping poses, nicknamed her "the Curve to End all Curves." Her only salient features were a thin, jutting nose and a pair of rather protuberant eyes, both of which came into play when, quarter of an hour after their arrival, Miss Blande announced that she felt ill and could not take part in the exhibition tonight.

Miss Agg-Thoresby's eyes registered suffering and spiritual resignation, her nose twitched with less refined emotions.

"Nonsense, Mabel," she said. "We don't understand the word 'illness.' It's not in our vocabulary. Your soul is a little out of tune, dear, that's all. Breathe deeply and plunge yourself into the Infinite."

Mabel Blande followed her leader's instructions, but to no purpose.

"I'm sorry," she said obstinately. "It doesn't seem to—I mean, I must have eaten something that disagreed with me."

Miss Agg-Thoresby winced. Mrs. Fortescue, who had been watching the scene with an expressionless face, now remarked,

"I'm afraid she does look rather unw—rather out of tune. I think you'll have to—er—perform without her."

"We don't *perform,* Mrs. Fortescue," said Lobelia gently. "We *interpret.* We are vessels. We receive, and we pour out. But it's quite out of the question," she went on more sharply. "We must have seven. The seven-pointed star, you see. But I'm afraid you wouldn't understand."

"Perhaps my friend, Miss Lestrange, could help you," replied the vicar's wife, pointing to Georgia.

Miss Agg-Thoresby's pale eyes turned slowly towards Georgia, focussed on her as though she were an object infinitely remote, to whom distance lent only a dubious enchantment.

"Are you initiated, Miss Lestrange? Are you of us?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," answered Georgia boldly. "In my own circle I am known as the seventh pillar of light."

Miss Agg-Thoresby expressed her satisfaction, and they all retired to change for the rehearsal. Georgia put on Miss Blande's garments. The seven wore flowing orange draperies which, in their less statuesque movements, were discarded to reveal magenta knickers and brassière—the latter being for Miss Agg-Thoresby rather in the position of a sinecure, Georgia imagined. The rehearsal went off fairly well, and Georgia had little difficulty in picking up the hang of the thing. She was not sorry, however, when Lobelia approached her afterwards, cooing:

"Yes, dear. I can see you have the"—her hands wove a misty gesture out of thin air—"the *tone,* the *vibrations.* But perhaps you'd better remain rather in the background this time."

"Of course." The background is just where I want to remain, Georgia reflected. Still, Mrs. Fortescue was quite right that I must take part in the performance in order to establish myself as one of the Radiance Girls and get away with them afterwards. Let's hope the village hall is not too well lighted.

Miss Agg-Thoresby had seen to that, it transpired. She had had the flood-lights swathed in red, so that the Radiance Girls posed and moved in a dim, pink glow which gave them, when the draperies were discarded, the appearance of being lightly coated with Euthymol toothpaste.

The village audience was somewhat overawed by Miss Agg-Thoresby's opening remarks, which urged them to relax, breathe deeply, and render their souls plastic to the influence of Psycho-physical Irradiation as about to be let loose by the seven. It remained impervious to the orange-draperied evolutions, too. But when the Radiance Girls put off their outer coverings and began to prance in all the glory of magenta knickers and toothpaste pink flesh, psycho-physical irradiation really seemed to set in on the audience. A gasp went up. Some hardier spirits at the back, whistling, cat-calling and stamping their feet on the boards, began to evince a plasticity of soul which the vicar found it necessary to quell rather soon. While a very old man by the gangway remarked audibly that that were a tidy bit of goods in the front row, dang his eyes if her weren't.

It's lucky, thought Georgia as she wove about on the stage, that this gang goes in for free interpretation, or I'd be shown up properly. Remaining well in the background, she let her eyes rove over the audience. They were mostly village women, with a sprinkling of youths. She noticed one man, leaning against the side wall, who looked rather out of place here: he wore riding-breeches and a check coat, he had a heavy, lowering face; and his eyes were scrutinizing the audience covertly, intently, as though taking a silent roll-call.

After the first interpretation was over, Miss Agg-Thoresby delivered some poems of her own composition in front of the closed curtain. Georgia drew aside Mrs. Fortescue, who was helping behind the scenes, led her on to the stage, and asked her to peep through the curtain.

"Who's that young man standing up at the side—the one in riding-breeches?"

"Let's see now. Oh, that's Mr. Raynham."

"A local?"

"Yes. He came here about five years ago. He's a gentleman farmer. I mean, that's what he calls himself. If you ask me, he never was a gentleman and never will be a farmer," Mrs. Fortescue giggled: then looked rather ashamed at her own malice. "My dear, I'm afraid you lead me on. I'm sure he's quite a worthy young man in his way."

And *I'm* quite sure, thought Georgia, that he's one of the E.B. I must keep my weather eye lifting for him. When the Radiance Girls took the stage again, Georgia noticed Mr. Raynham observing them attentively. After a few moments he walked out, making no attempt to soften the clump of his boots on the wooden floor. A mannerless young man, thought Georgia: but that's scarcely the point now. Is he quick-witted, too? Did he spot me? Has he gone out to make preparations?

Twenty minutes more, and the show was over. The vicar, bemused but still courteous, made a speech of thanks. The team retired to change. This was going to be the awkward passage. Mrs. Fortescue took Lobelia Agg-Thoresby aside, told her that Miss Blande was too ill to travel tonight, asked if "Miss Lestrange" could go back in the bus with them instead. She and Georgia had previously decided that this, though risky, would be a safer course than for Georgia to try and pass herself off as Miss Blande to the team in general when they embarked on the bus. On receiving Miss Agg-Thoresby's assent, the vicar's wife sat down beside Georgia and whispered:

"Someone's been in the vicarage while we were out. We left it locked: but I found a window opened when I went back just now."

"What about Miss Blande?"

"She's all right. I took her across to a neighbour just before the show started, as we arranged. I'm sure no one could have seen us—it was pitch dark: and the neighbour won't talk. We'll smuggle her out of the village in a couple of days' time. Will that give you long enough?"

"Mrs. Fortescue, you've been an angel. I don't know how to thank you," said Georgia, pressing her hand.

"Don't be silly, my dear. It's I who should thank you. I don't get so much excitement that—well, never mind—I hope everything will go well with you. Let us know, won't you?"

Lobelia Agg-Thoresby marshalled the Radiance Girls and hooshed them outside. A few villagers, standing by the roadside, watched them phlegmatically. There was no sign of the young man in the riding-breeches. Carrying the suitcase Mrs. Fortescue had lent her, wearing the vicar's-wifely clothes which Mrs. Fortescue had altered for her yesterday, Georgia darted into the small private bus. The seats faced each other along the sides of the vehicle. Georgia took up her position at the far end from the driver, next to the emergency-door. It was vaguely comforting to be there, though she did not suppose any emergency-door would be adequate to the kind of emergency the E.B. might contrive.

Miss Agg-Thoresby clambered in last, throwing over her shoulder a parting remark to the vicar, whom she had been attempting to proselytise:

"But it's not religious, Mr. Fortescue. It's just cosmic."

The bus started. . . .

Chapter 19

The Episode of the Station Barrow

In the rackety bus, Georgia weighed up her chances. She had little doubt that they would be stopped by the E.B. before they left the district. If she managed to get past them unrecognized then, she would be out of the danger zone—or the worst part of it, and could take a train from Cheltenham to Oxford. The very thought made her almost crazy with relief and happiness, but she thrust it firmly from her. Time enough for that, if and when . . . The question was, had she been recognized by the "gentleman farmer," Mr. Raynham, in the village hall? If not, the scrutiny of the bus would be more perfunctory and she might get through. If she had been recognized, her number was up. She put the odds against herself at three to one, therefore. Had she known who was awaiting the bus a mile ahead, in a car drawn up by the roadside, she would have made a very different bet.

The bus clattered through the night. The Radiance Girls chatted desultorily. Presently the driver, perceiving the bull's-eye of a torch waving at him from the middle of the road ahead, slowed down and came to a halt.

Now for it, thought Georgia. She pulled Mrs. Fortescue's hat closer down upon her head, adjusted the old pair of pince-nez Mrs. Fortescue had lent her. A pitiful disguise, she thought: "there's more enterprise in walking naked."

A man opened the sliding door in front and held a brief, muttered conversation with the driver. It was Mr. Raynham. He glanced up and down the aisle of the bus, his eyes pausing on Georgia a moment. Then he said to Miss Agg-Thoresby:

"Sorry to hold you up and all that. Was driving a friend of mine into Cheltenham—car broke down. He's in rather a hurry—he's got to catch a train. D'you mind taking him along with you?"

The leader of the Radiance Girls fluttered, blushed, said, "Why, of course. Certainly." Georgia was edging her hand towards the bar of the emergency-door: but then she saw a couple of men standing in the roadway behind. She couldn't understand the tactics of the E.B. patrol. Nor was she given any leisure to contemplate them. A little stir and mutter went up from the Radiance Girls—the kind of stir created by an invalid or a blind man when he comes into a room full of people. The man whom Mr. Raynham was helping into the bus was, indeed, blind. At least, he wore a shade over his eyes and held a walking-stick out in front of him like an antenna. There were sympathetic murmurs, in which the word "blind" vaguely recurred.

"Blind," Georgia wanted to shriek: "that's not the point, you fools! It's you who are blind! Can't you see? Don't you know who this is? Don't you know it's Chilton Canteloe?"

In a flash, while Mr. Raynham solicitously escorted Chilton down the gangway towards the vacant seat beside Georgia, she realized the whole truth. On hearing of her escape from the ambushed pantechnicon, Chilton must have hurried to the district to direct operations himself, preferring that he should lose his anonymity as leader of the E.B. rather than that she should slip through their hands again. The local E.B. no doubt had no more than a photograph and verbal description of Georgia to go on. Mr. Raynham thought he had recognized her on the village-hall stage, but he could not be sure. Chilton was here to make sure. He did not need the sight of his eyes to recognize her.

All he had to do was to sit down beside her, as he was sitting down now, and whisper, "Good evening, Georgia."

She knew that any attempt to disguise her voice would be futile. She might waste a little time that way; but what was the use?

"Good evening, Chilton," she said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I thought so," he remarked, loud enough for Mr. Raynham to hear, who at once moved back along the gangway to sit next to the driver. Chilton, leaning towards her, began whispering again.

"Are you going to come quietly, as they say?"

"And if I don't?"

"My friend has a revolver. He will compel the driver to turn up a side road. There'll be a car following, and everybody will be taken out of this bus and shot. I can't leave any loose ends just now."

Georgia knew he was not bluffing. There was an edge to his voice, cold as steel, utterly merciless.

"Very well," she said.

The bus rattled on. The Radiance Girls chattered, yawned, threw curious glances at the handsome, blind man sitting so quietly there. A motorbike and sidecar, travelling fast, roared past them and ahead. Presently

Chilton's stick fell with a clatter to the floor. It must have been a prearranged signal. Mr. Raynham looked round, then spoke to the driver. The bus ground to a halt, a car stopping just behind it.

"They seem to have got our car to go," Mr. Raynham said. "Here it is. We'd better change back into it. Thanks for the lift."

"Would you care to come with us?" Chilton asked Georgia. "The chauffeur can drop you at your destination after he's left me at the station."

"Thanks very much." Georgia would have liked to add, "Lord Canteloe," but she knew it would seal the fate of every one in the bus. Mr. Raynham helped Chilton through the emergency-door, then politely lifted out Georgia's suitcase. She felt quite numb as they escorted her to the waiting car: helpless as a cork on a stormy sea. Is this what people feel like when they walk out to their execution, she dimly wondered—to the blindfold drop, the blood-stained wall?

They put her into the back of the car. Fatalistically, as one who greets a death grown familiar by suffering and long expectation, she breathed in without a struggle the chloroform of the pad that was held over her face. She thought, why bother with all this? The last thing she heard was Chilton saying, "Don't be rough with her. I want to deal with her myself, later. . . ."

She awoke in utter darkness. Her head ached, and the fumes of chloroform were in her throat, mingled with a faint smell of mildew. The darkness appalled her. For a moment she was seized by an absolute terror, believing that Chilton had already taken his revenge and put out her eyes. Then, coming right out of the anaesthetic, she realized how absurd this was: there was no pain in her eyes—yet.

Her bag, containing the papers of Plan A, and her revolver, had been taken away. Automatically she felt inside her clothes, to see if they had found the copy which she had stitched up in her corselette. No, it was still there. Not that it made any difference. They'd never let her get out of this place alive. Where was she, anyway?

With a dull curiosity, she began to feel her way through the darkness. Smooth stone floor, damp walls, a window boarded up with wood: a room about twelve foot square, smelling of mildew. The living-room of some derelict cottage, she imagined: on the land of Mr. Raynham, perhaps—Mr. Raynham who had never been a gentleman and never would be a farmer. She tried to find a crack in the boarded window: it seemed suddenly important to know whether it was still night outside: but there were no cracks big enough to see through. The emptiness of the room, like some figure in a nightmare which advances step by step from immeasurable distance to reveal its sinister intent, gradually forced its full meaning upon her.

It was to be the arena of her last struggle with Chilton Canteloe. Nor did he intend to give her the least chance. Every scrap of wood or old metal, which she might have used for a weapon, had been removed. For an instant, panic got the better of her. She ran at the door, beat her fists against the panel. As if it had been a signal, footsteps were heard outside. Georgia ran back and crouched in a far corner. Chilton Canteloe was saying to someone:

"All right. I'll go in now. You can lock the door behind me."

The door opened and closed, revealing a faint false dawn that disappeared at once and made the darkness more intense. Georgia could hear his unhurried breathing twelve feet away. She imagined the smile on his face.

"Well, Georgia, pipped on the post, aren't you?"

She said nothing.

"I've been looking forward to our reunion. You nearly blinded me that night. They say I may recover my sight, however. Won't you congratulate me? I'm afraid you'll not recover yours, my dear. I shall make quite certain of that."

Georgia remained silent, immobile, though she felt that her heart, lurching inside her body so sickeningly, must betray her.

"Wouldn't you like to scream, or something?" he asked politely. "No one will hear you, of course, but they say it brings relief. No? Well, I hope you'll enjoy our little game of Blind Man's Buff in your own quiet way, then."

He began to advance upon her through the darkness. Her only instinct was to keep away from those outstretched fingers as long as she could. Or perhaps his arms were swinging loosely before him in that bear-like gait she recollected too well. She slipped aside from his first rush, vaguely surprised that her feet made no sound on the stone floor, realizing for the first time that they had taken her shoes away. Of course they had. A shoe's heel would serve at a pinch for a weapon. Chilton was thorough.

For a few minutes she continued to elude him. But her efforts made her breathe hard, and she knew her breathing must give her away. Round and across the room he lumbered after her, his fingers feeling at the darkness like antennae, taking his time about it. There was a remorselessness, a horror about the blind pursuit which made her want to shriek for help, though no help could ever come; but she was determined not to let

Chilton have this triumph over her weakness too. At last, almost distraught, she decided to end it. Standing still against the wall, breathing hard, she awaited his leisurely approach. When she heard him close in front, she hurled herself forward knee-high into the darkness, hoping that she might knock him off his feet, perhaps crack his head against the stone floor in falling, anything to stop this cruel, deadly game he was playing with her.

Her body struck his legs just above the knee. He fell forward, but in doing so grabbed her dress. Now she was aware of his strength. She struggled like a wildcat, but soon he had her down, his knees pressing into her body, his fingers feeling delicately toward her eyes. Suddenly she went limp. She knew that this ice-cold, chuckling maniac would defer his revenge if he believed she had fainted. He wanted her to feel it all.

"Oh, no. Georgia, it won't do. Don't pretend you've passed out," said Chilton and, lifting her limp hand, deliberately broke the little finger. Georgia bit her lip to repress a cry, but a shudder of agony went through her body, and now she fainted in real earnest . . .

At this moment, two men appeared outside the derelict cottage, gave a pass-word to the guard at the door, and were directed towards the little room where Chilton and Georgia had struggled.

"A message for the Chief. Urgent," said one of the men to the guard outside the room.

"He's busy," said the man, jerking his head towards the door.

An E.B. badge was flashed before his eyes. "Open up, blast you, or he'll take it out of you."

The guard turned to unlock the door. . . .

Coming out of her swoon, Georgia moaned. She was being carried like a sack, slung over a man's shoulders. They were emerging into cold air and the beginnings of dawn. She heard the man who carried her say to someone:

"It's O.K., boys. The Chief told us to take this dame away—what he's left of her—and dig a nice deep hole. He's busy over the message we brought him, and doesn't want to be disturbed for half an hour. So long."

Georgia's brain began to work quickly. Chilton could only have meant to frighten her, then. Well, he'd done that all right. But it was these men who were to be the executioners. Better them, a thousand times, than—and she might even escape them, now she was out into the open, out of that devilish, mildew-smelling room.

The men bundled her into a car. They set off, bumping fast down a grassy track. Georgia pretended to be unconscious still, hoarding her strength for a last effort. The two men remained silent. After about ten minutes the car slowed down. She was lifted out, hoisted on a shoulder again, carried quickly towards a high bank which she was seeing upside down. They were scrambling up the bank. Suddenly, with a dreadful stab of fear, Georgia recognized that it was a railway embankment. They were not going to "dig a nice deep hole" for her: they were going to put her across the line in front of a train: neater, in a way. She stayed relaxed, waiting till they put her down before springing to life.

But they were carrying her across the metals, towards a small shed at the side—a plate-layer's hut. The door was opened. A man in greasy clothes, neckerchief and cloth cap was sitting inside, his back turned to them, warming his hands over an oil-stove. As they entered and she was put gently down, he turned round, sprang forward, held out his hands. With a gasp of pure astonishment, Georgia stumbled forward into Sir John Strangeways' arms. . . .

A few minutes later, revivified with brandy, she was saying shakily:

"But I thought you were—the papers said——"

"I'm tougher than they give me credit for. Actually, I left the nursing-home a couple of days ago, but we thought it best for the E.B. to imagine I was still there."

Sir John's eyes twinkled in his dirty face.

"You do look ruffianly, Uncle John. I never supposed a man in your exalted position would descend to these low disguises. How did you find me? Is Nigel all right? Where is he?"

"He's very well. Awaiting you in Oxford. I've had some trouble keeping him out of this, especially when we heard you were on the run. We found you by keeping tabs on Canteloe in the first place: we knew he would come out in the open after you'd got away with the plans. He followed you, and we followed him. The two chaps who drove you in that pantechnicon turned up trumps too. They had a bit of a towsing from the E.B. men, but they got away in the end and turned in a report at the nearest police-station. Luckily the Inspector there was a sound chap. He phoned through to me, and that's how we knew you were in this district. It was the first we'd heard of you since you rang up Alison Grove from Manchester. Even then, you'd concealed yourself so well that we couldn't find another trace of you for a bit. I was getting a little worried."

"I was getting a little worried myself," Georgia replied sardonically.

"At any rate," said Sir John, vigorously rubbing his moustache, "my men who were tailing Canteloe saw him stop that bus you were in last night. Queer company you do keep nowadays, Georgia. The Radiance

Girls! Oh my aunt! Well they followed you up to that cottage. Couldn't do any more. Too strongly guarded. Afraid there was a bit of a delay there. Had to call up two of my chaps who are in the E.B. and send them to hoick you out. A ticklish business, my dear. I didn't dare attack the place in force—I knew they'd kill you the instant the alarm was given."

"He didn't need any alarm to do that—or try his hardest to," Georgia said. She still found it difficult to mention Chilton Canteloe by name. Sir John leant forward and stroked her hand, noticing the way she winced when accidentally he touched the little finger he had re-set and bandaged in a make-shift splint. A look came into Sir John's blue eyes—a look Georgia had seen once or twice on Nigel's face, and was never likely to forget: a smouldering anger that would not be extinguished till somebody had paid up in full.

"Canteloe will not be allowed any more rope," said Sir John, "you can be sure of that. Let me see the plans."

"I shall have to undress a bit. I've been using them to pad out my meagre figure."

"You've done very well, my dear. We're all proud of you. I don't think anybody else could have pulled it off."

Sir John's brisk, kindly voice brought tears to her eyes. She felt suddenly weak, ready to indulge in one of her very rare moments of self-pity.

"He—he was trying to put out my eyes, Uncle John," she said in a wavering voice.

"He was, was he? Well, I don't expect he's feeling too good himself at the moment. Here, take another swig at the brandy, my dear. That's right. The men who rescued you knocked the guard over the head as he was unlocking the door. Then they did the same for Canteloe. They left the two of them locked up in the room. The cottage is surrounded. It's all over now, bar the shooting," said Sir John grimly.

"Here's what he called Plan A. And this is his double-cross, Plan B."

"Yes," said Sir John, after he had glanced through the second document. "I never suspected this. He was bigger, in his damnable way, than I reckoned. Shall I thank you all over again?"

"Don't be a goose." Georgia rubbed his oily sleeve affectionately. "You know, you look rather impressive as a plate-layer. Is it a plate-layer you're meant to be? Do you know how to lay plates? I'm sure you do—you know everything. I—oh hell!——"

Georgia surprised them both by bursting suddenly and comprehensively into a flood of tears.

"There, darling, it's all right, it's all over and done with," said Sir John, taking her into his arms. . . .

Later that morning she was travelling in a train through the Cotswolds. Her compartment was locked. One of Sir John's men was sitting with her, another stood in the corridor outside. As she looked out of the window, it seemed to her that never in all her travels had she seen anything as beautiful as this country, the stone-built walls and villages, the hills modest in their brown-green winter dress. At one point the London road ran close beside the railway. Along this road, a few hours ago, had travelled a convoy of armoured cars—a common enough sight on the roads today, only that the guns of these cars were loaded and their crews alert in the turrets. Sir John Strangeways was taking no chances. Nothing short of an earthquake or an army brigade would stop him getting to London with the E.B. plans.

Georgia's eyes returned to the countryside sweeping past. The little train puffed importantly along, hurrying to catch the express at Kingham. The hills unfolded, as if they were taking the train into their gentle arms. Hurry, train, hurry, mustn't keep him waiting. Nearly a whole year now—that's a long time out of one's life. Will he look just the same? I'm safe, I'm safe, I'm safe! I'd forgotten what the word "safety" meant. We're all safe, all the decent, ordinary, hard-working people, the people who make England . . .

In the station yard at Oxford, ten minutes before the train was due, stood a sports-car, its engine ticking over. There were two men in it, men with thick necks and small, stupid, arrogant eyes. One of them played with the safety-catch of a revolver. They had driven up to the station after a telephone call had come through ordering them to get Georgia Strangeways at all costs.

One man had slipped through the cordon Sir John had thrown round the derelict cottage. Chilton Canteloe, on recovering consciousness and finding Georgia gone, knew that he was finished. The whole rancour of his defeat concentrated itself upon Georgia, who had turned all his plans and ambitions to dust. She, at least, should not live to enjoy her triumph. His last order to the E.B. was that Georgia Strangeways must be killed. He did not tell them the killing would be as pointless as a boy crushing an ant under his foot, though the manner of Georgia's rescue left no doubt in his own mind that by now she must have passed the plans into other hands.

The man with the revolver glanced at his wrist-watch. "Due in any moment now," he said. "Suppose we can get away O.K.? Seem to be a lot of people waiting about."

"You plug this woman and I'll do the rest. Getting cold feet, or what? They'll not be expecting any one to start anything here . . ."

The train slowed down along the platform. Standing at the window, Georgia could not see Nigel at all: there was such a crowd of undergraduates milling about. It must be a rag, she thought. Then a tall figure came thrusting down the platform. It was Nigel. For a moment they stood there, holding hands, beaming all over their faces, unable to say a word.

"Well, you got here all right." Nigel got out at last. It was not one of the world's most memorable sayings, but Georgia would never forget it.

"Yes. I got here. You're looking very well. Oh, darling, I just can't kiss you in front of all these young men. Why are they staring at me so? Is my hat on upside down?"

"Well, as a matter of fact they're a kind of reception. For you. Just a little tribute to——"

"Nigel, I flatly refuse——"

"Come on, boys."

A flat luggage-barrow, something like a coster's cart, emerged from the crowd. Before Georgia could begin to protest, she was hoisted up by three pairs of arms and seated firmly in the barrow. Nigel pushed it towards the exit.

"Nigel, you devil. I'll never forgive you for this," she yelled at him; but her voice was drowned by the laughing, cheering mob of undergraduates, who formed a phalanx all round the barrow and marched out thus into the station yard, showering platform-tickets all over the bemused ticket-collector as they passed.

"What the devil's all this?" exclaimed the man with the revolver to his companion in the red sports-car.

"There she is!" said the other. "That's her! Make it snappy now!"

"Christ, I can't shoot through that mob. They'd lynch us." His revolver wavered in his hand, trying to find an opening amid the crowd that hemmed the barrow round.

Wheeling the barrow, regardless of his wife's black looks, Nigel thought of the phone message he had received from his uncle early this morning. "They may try something on at Oxford," Sir John had said. "One of them got away from my men, and Canteloe's quite cross with Georgia. I can't spare more than two men for a bodyguard, so you'd better see to it. If possible, she mustn't know. She's rather near the edge."

Nigel had seen to it. He didn't want Georgia to be alarmed. She'd been through enough already. So he had hit on the idea of an undergraduate rag and told his young cousin to organize it.

Georgia, fuming at this dreadful publicity, yet beginning to be infected by the wild hilarity of her escort and the ludicrousness of the whole situation, was wheeled out through the station yard, quite oblivious of the killer whose gun poked ineffectually at the crowd, only ten yards away from her body as they passed the red sports-car. Nor was she in a position to see Sir John's two men, who had escorted her in the train and were now walking rather sheepishly at the tail of the procession, suddenly grow tense as they observed the cold glint of metal half concealed by the E.B. man's gauntlet—grow tense, give each other one glance, swerve aside a little from the procession, and pounce on the occupants of the sports-car.

None of this did Georgia see. Down the station road they went, over the canal, across the Cornmarket into the Broad, the crowd swelling every minute, windows opening in the staid college walls—a shouting, cheering, singing crowd, with the small, brown-eyed woman on the station barrow quite lost in their midst. But Georgia was now enjoying herself. Yes, she was really enjoying her triumph. Bless you, Nigel, you crazy darling idiot. Bless you all.

Chapter 20

The Episode of the Last Laugh

Georgia and Nigel were driving home to Devonshire. It was a week after her triumphal procession through the streets of Oxford. During this week, she had received communications from several Important Personages; they wished her to come to London and receive the thanks of the Nation from them, but she pleaded ill-health, preferring to stay with Nigel in the peace of Oxford. As a matter of fact, with her extraordinary resilience she had quickly overcome the effects of those last desperate days: the whole of this year now seemed to her a nightmare interlude in a normal life, and she did not wish to be reminded of it by the fulsome compliments of politicians whose own pusillanimity or self-interest were responsible for its having happened at all. She had performed her task, and wanted no thanks for something which should never have been necessary.

During this week Sir John Strangeways, with the speed of attack, the economy and the decisiveness of a great general, broke the E.B. for good and all. There were a few sporadic outbreaks of violence up and down the country; but the E.B., leaderless and bewildered, forced prematurely into a rising that had already lost its heart, caved in quickly. Chilton Canteloe had made a fatal mistake in not launching the rebellion a week ago, when Georgia first escaped from his burning house. But, with Sir John out of action and Georgia's recapture, as he believed, only a matter of hours, he had decided to keep his men in check. The arrangements for foreign intervention had not been wholly completed; and, like other dictators and would-be dictators, he was misled by vainglory and the flattery of subordinates into under-estimating the opposition.

During his first period of imprisonment, Chilton had leisure to meditate these mistakes. His thoughts were sufficiently disagreeable to break down the thin partition that had stood between him and madness. When the other leaders of the E.B. came up to stand their trial, Chilton was already tucked away in an asylum, where he spent much of his time playing with a mechanical race-game and a rocking-horse . . .

Georgia leant her head against Nigel's shoulder. The little car bumped and swayed up the lane towards their cottage, brambles scraping against its side. A plume of smoke rose out of their chimney, that appeared above the top of the unkempt hedge. Georgia felt weak with happiness: this home-coming was almost worth their year of separation and everything she had endured. Suddenly she put her hand to her mouth.

"Heavens, darling!" she exclaimed. "We forgot——"

She couldn't go on. She gestured weakly towards the hedge, neatly pared on the far side, but rank and luxuriant all along the border of their own property.

"But Coombes was told to keep the garden tidy for me," said Nigel.

"Poor old Coombes has a very literal mind. If you didn't mention the hedge, he wouldn't do the hedge."

They garaged the car and went indoors. There were a few bills and letters lying on the table. Georgia began opening them.

"Nigel, come here. The worst has happened," she cried tragically.

"What's that?"

"Look, a notice from the Council. It starts off, 'Inasmuch as . . .' There's a nasty ring about that phrase. Yes, we've failed to cut our hedge, we have to appear before a Justice of the Peace, we are to be prosecuted. D'you think they'll put us in prison?"

"I'm afraid so," said Nigel solemnly. "We have broken the law. We must pay."

Georgia waved the official notice in the air. "The Thanks of a Grateful Country," she declaimed. "I shall wear it next my heart for ever."

(continued from front flap)

gruesome discovery—a half-disjointed skeleton simmering in the very same vat. Keys, jewelry and false teeth all identify the victim as Bunnett himself! Everyone, from his browbeaten family to his overworked employees, had reason to hate Eustace Bunnett. But only one hated him enough to kill!

In ***The Smiler With the Knife,*** Nigel and his adventure-loving wife, Georgia, have been officially notified that it's time to trim the roadside hedges. While thus engaged, Georgia finds a locket containing a woman's photograph and a folded Union Jack stamped with the initials E.B. When their dour neighbor, Major Keston, guiltily claims it the next day, Nigel's curiosity is aroused. A bit of snooping soon reveals the locket's secret: A clandestine society, the English Banner, is planning a takeover of the British government... by its own upper crust! What began so innocently soon becomes Georgia's most dangerous mission, as she "divorces" Nigel to turn double agent for Scotland Yard... and save England from a ruthless megalomaniac in aristocrat's clothing!

Jacket illustration by Marie Michal

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

11964